

Eagles' Nest

2010

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Asylum Piece
A Bright Green Field
Ice
Julia and the Bazooka
Let Me Alone
My Soul in China
A Scarcity of Love
Sleep Has His House
Who Are You?

ANNA KAVAN

Eagles' Nest

A NOVEL



PETER OWEN · LONDON

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ONE

Chattering and giggling, rather like a flock of bright-coloured birds in their gay sweaters, the typists trooped off to the canteen, leaving me temporarily in possession of the office on the top floor of the big department store where I was employed as "advertising artist"—surely the most degrading of the whole succession of haphazard makeshift jobs which had replaced the absorbing, congenial work for which I had been trained.

I had always done so well in my chosen profession, nothing could have seemed more promising than my future, or more secure, when I was abruptly discharged, through no fault of mine, but because a reduction in personnel became necessary, and chance was allowed to decide who should go. How could I help feeling aggrieved and embittered by such disastrous bad luck? Innocence was no consolation, since, to the general public, dismissal meant that one must have done wrong.

The grubby little waitress bribed to bring up my morning tea burst in, and, having dumped down the tray among pots of paint, varnish and coloured ink in front of me, burst out again, banging the door behind her. Trying to forget my ruined career, I picked up the chipped cup; only to see printed on the newspaper-traycloth, the words, "global unrest"—the very words used at that fatal interview which had divided my life into two distinct halves: the first, bright with the cer-

PETER OWEN LIMITED
20 Holland Park Avenue London W11 3QU

Reprinted 1976
First British Commonwealth edition 1957
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Printed in Great Britain by
REDWOOD BURN LIMITED
Trowbridge and Esher

tainty it was good to exist; the other, darkened more and more often by doubts as to whether it was worth living.

Now, in these sordid surroundings, I seemed to have sunk so low that it was impossible to go on. It was winter-time, and the cramped untidy office under the roof contrived to be both cold and stuffy, the fumes of an ancient gasfire mingling with the smell of paint and of feminine perspiration. In this atmosphere I passed my days, working with difficulty in the bad light, my table pushed into a corner, as though I were less important than the teenage typists. To make me share their office, was only one of the mean tricks by which the sadistic store proprietor deliberately humiliated me and traded on my misfortunes.

Why didn't I leave, then? This was a free country. I was not compelled to work for a tyrannical bully who exploited me scandalously. But, though I knew I ought to stand up to him, undermined by constant disparagement, I lacked the courage to do so, almost believing no one else would ever employ me.

Suddenly I felt ashamed of the way I was allowing myself to be crushed into spiritless apathy by overwork and a sense of being displaced and unwanted: I pushed the teacup aside, and to distract my thoughts, turned back to the columns of print. This time, the heading happened to be Situations Vacant, which, with the superstition of the unlucky, I regarded as a good omen; and, sure enough, very soon I was reading:

"The Administrator—offers a man of integrity the chance to start a new life on his country estate in ——. No technical qualifications required, but applicant

will be expected to make himself useful according to his ability."

I had met this Administrator in the course of my work, and, when I was discharged, he took me under his protection, employing me to catalogue the books in his large library—a generous act of trust for which I always felt deeply grateful. I suppose this was why it seemed quite natural that he should come to my rescue again, just when I was in the depths of despair—I seemed almost to have been expecting it, and, with an instant change of mood, felt happy, as if the advertisement applied to me alone, and showed that he still cared about me.

All that was dark and troubled in my existence was hidden now by my vision of this man, which, though we had not met since I ceased to work in his library, had only grown more vivid with passing time. Disregarding a suspicion that it incorporated dream-shadings indistinguishable from genuine memories, I still thought of him as my friend and patron; an absent protector, who knew all about my doings and difficulties, and followed them sympathetically from afar.

Then, why, I couldn't help asking myself, had I never tried to contact him all this time? I was not even exactly jumping at this wonderful chance . . . although, of course, I meant to answer the advertisement . . . something seemed to be holding me back . . . warning me not to . . .

But now a clock struck, reminding me that the typists would soon be back. In a frantic hurry, I seized from the nearest desk a sheet of the firm's notepaper, and hastily wrote a few sentences to the Administrator, men-

tioning my past work, and saying how glad I should be to work for him again, anywhere, in any capacity. For some reason it seemed to me most important that the girls should know nothing about the letter; so, without even reading through what I'd written, I pushed it out of sight; just as they reappeared, to end my brief spell of privacy, and to keep their inquisitive teasing watch on all my doings.

I had no time to brood over the result of my application, for it was December, and, as well as my usual work, I was expected to turn out all sorts of attractions for Christmas, including a group of life-sized plaster angels for the outside of the store, which the proprietor ordered me to construct during the last week. I protested that it was impossible, and would take far longer; but he, knowing quite well that I was too conscientious to do this, and that whatever I undertook would always be done to the best of my ability, merely told me to omit the details, since the figures would only be seen from the street below. As I had to produce angels, they must be given at least a semblance of dignity. So, furious at his unreasonable demands, I set off that evening, in search of inspiration, for an abbey in one of the suburbs, where some famous stained-glass windows represented the hierarchy of the heavenly host.

The journey took longer than I expected; I had plenty of time to curse my inconvenient conscience, and to think what a fool I was to take all this trouble, for which I would never receive the least credit. Arriving at last, cold and tired, I pushed open the heavy padded door of the ancient building; and, as I did so, as if on purpose to frustrate me, the lights began to go out one

by one, till only a few far-off candles were left glimmering like bunches of yellow flowers.

It looked as if the abbey were about to be closed; but there was no one to ask; the great dark place seemed deserted. I could make out only a few dim coffin shapes, and, hanging from the black vault above, objects reminding me of the lolling tongues of giant dogs, which I took to be the flags of some old campaign. The possibility of getting shut in for the night almost made me turn back to the door. But, though I knew the sensible thing was to go outside, I did not move, suddenly immobilized by a strange sensation.

It was as though I had parted company all at once with my usual reasoning self, which had withdrawn into the shadows, leaving me no means of communicating with it; while another "I" took command, functioning at a different, more mysterious level, where all outer appearances were deceptive, and even the thoughts in my head shot with ambiguity.

Meanwhile, accustomed to the darkness, my eyes could distinguish the geography of the aisles, and, hesitating no longer, I went into an adjoining side-chapel and looked up at the window. Its tall narrow pointed outline showed clearly, a spider's web of black lines stretched over the pale light from a street-lamp, which was not strong enough to reveal the colours of the glass, or what it represented.

Still in that queer "other" state I scarcely had time to feel disappointed, before I received an impression of danger, emanating, it seemed at first, from those black meshes, which were trying to entangle me in their crafty web. The next moment I realized that the whole silent,

solemn, superstition-charged atmosphere of the abbey had become sinister and antagonistic. Even the clustering flames had lost their flowerlike prettiness, transformed into misleading will-o'-the-wisps, confusing me by their untrustworthy flickerings.

Unmistakeable sounds of a key being turned and bolts shot, abruptly recalled me from this hallucinated condition. Conscious of nothing now but the need to escape, I shouted, "Wait! Let me out!" and started running, stumbling over unseen obstacles, towards the door, on which I beat my fists loudly. When, without warning, it suddenly opened, I practically fell through into the porch beyond, almost on top of an old man in a sort of black nightgown, who threatened, with a mixture of fright and belligerence that would have been laughable in other circumstances, to call the police.

A low-powered bulb, over lists of Advent preachers and subscribers to various charities, showed him raising a whistle to his lips; I jumped forward to stop him blowing it, explaining, at the same time, that my intentions had been quite innocent—I'd hardly have made such a row otherwise. But I could tell, by the new cunning look on his face, that nothing except a bribe would keep him quiet, so I reluctantly handed over a few small coins I certainly could not spare. Stowing them away in his voluminous black skirts, and producing from the same repository a packet of picture postcards, the old rascal had the effrontery to say, "We're not allowed to accept tips, but if you like you can buy one of these."

Disgusted, I snatched a card at random and put it into my pocket without a glance, only anxious to terminate the absurd, exasperating scene. On the way home, I

had the depressing idea that my intelligence must be deteriorating seriously, since even this grasping old verger could get the better of me. My lack of either spirit or confidence suggested that some character defect was coming to light, under pressure of my unhappy present existence.

It was very late when, worn out and sunk in gloom, I entered my dismal lodging. If only I could get right away from everything, and start afresh! By making this wish, I perceived that I no longer trusted the Administrator to come to my rescue. I didn't want to think about him at all. Nor did I want to think about the fiasco of my trip to the abbey. But I was reminded of both when I took off my coat, and the card fell out of the pocket.

For a second, I really thought I was looking at the face of the man who had been my patron. It was an illusion, of course. The card actually showed one of the stained-glass angels I'd gone to see—perhaps it might inspire me. I went on studying, as I thought, for this reason, the serene unearthly beauty of the angelic face; and found, growing up simultaneously in my mind, the notion that it resembled the face of the man who occupied such a singular place in my thoughts and emotions. Or rather, some more significant connexion seemed to exist between them in the mysterious world of which I was newly aware; where I too was somehow concerned with them, not in my everyday self, but in that other identity outside my control, obscurely related to me.

Now I remembered having already received intimations of this second secret existence, though only in the form of vague hints I had chosen to disregard. Today for

the first time the other aspect of things had revealed itself fully, with a reality far beyond that of dreaming, so that I seemed to be living two lives at once. I noticed, though, that I never seemed fully aware of them both together; for now the concrete world regained the ascendancy, excluding the dream world beyond, but not obliterating my memory of it completely.

As the days passed, and still no message came from the Administrator, my disappointment was overlaid by forgetfulness; which came easily in the flood of work which overwhelmed me, as the hysteria of the pre-Christmas rush mounted daily, leaving me each night almost too tired to think.

My angels, finished miraculously on time, didn't displease me; especially as the proprietor's complaint that I'd made them too severe and not pretty enough, suggested to me that I must have reproduced something of the fabulous countenance, which, in some mysterious way, seemed to be two in one. Since the figures were supposed to surprise people on Christmas morning, they couldn't be installed in their places until after the store had closed the previous evening. The assistants told off for the job resented being kept late; it was hardly surprising that, in their haste, and in the dark, they dropped one, injuring the face quite severely.

Late as it was, I had to repair the damage that night. Up in the office on the top floor, I was about to start, when one of the typists, coming back for something she had forgotten, amazed me by staying for a few minutes, commiserating with me over my bad luck in being detained this particular evening. How impossible it would have been, I thought, after the girl had gone, to

explain that I was really quite glad to stay here, where my work gave me at least an illusion of being in touch with life and with other people. It was so long since anyone had spoken to me sympathetically that—though I realized the superficiality of her impulse—the few words must have disturbed me. Instead of settling down to my work, I wandered restlessly round the room, which seemed unnaturally quiet. It was strange to be alone in this one lighted room, floating like a bright bubble over the blackness that had engulfed the great building, through which, all day long, crowds had been noisily surging in a last-minute spending spree.

Now I came to the window I had unconsciously been avoiding. Now I could no longer refrain from looking at all the other bright windows, numerous and remote as stars, behind each of which a celebration, great or small, was in progress, or preparation. Now I couldn't pretend not to know that this was a night of general festivity and rejoicing, from which I alone was shut out. Why should I be forbidden to share the happiness to which all other human beings were entitled?

A devastating loneliness descended on me, I felt for ever cut off from everyone—there was nothing to be done about it. Yet the feeling was so unbearable that I *had* to do something, and, in desperation, threw open the window, leaning out as if this would bring me nearer to someone . . . to one of those hurrying forms in the street below. Their steps rang out coldly, the air was like a slap in the face, for everything outside was in the grip of an iron frost; enormous icicles, thicker than my arm, hung from the eaves above me. Hardly aware of the cold, I continued to lean out, almost hoping to lean

too far, as I stared down enviously at the oblivious strangers, wishing with all my heart I could change places with one of them.

I was staring so intently that it seemed incredible they should not be aware of me, and look up. But no one down there was even remotely conscious of my existence . . . no head was raised . . . Did love, hate, or pure despair, make me want to rush out madly into the street, seize some passer-by, and compel him to take notice of me by force? However, I had the sense to control the impulse, whatever its motive, and shutting the window, turn back resolutely to my work.

I must have been very disturbed, though, by these violent feelings, for I forgot all about the loose floor-board, which the proprietor, who lavished money on those parts of the store seen by the public, always neglected to have repaired. Catching my foot in it, I went flying, clutching the nearest desk, and sending in all directions the pile of papers the typist had left on the top. That I should have tripped and upset them seemed pure accident. Yet I had the feeling that this had been meant to happen, as I stooped to collect the documents into a wire tray. Suddenly my lonely sadness had turned into excited anticipation; something important was about to take place, and I almost knew what it was. Yet, when I picked up an envelope addressed to myself, I stared blankly at the Administrator's crest embossed on the flap. Not that there was any mystery about the letter being sent to me here; in writing my hasty application on the firm's paper, I must have omitted to add my own address, and the girls had either forgotten to hand over the answer, or had been keeping it back to tease me.

Unfolding the single typewritten sheet, I read:

"The Administrator—wishes to acknowledge your letter. He remembers the work you did in his town library and looks forward to renewing the association . . ."

Hurrying on to the end, I thought how strangely the letter was worded; every important point seemed to have been left out, the last sentences relating exclusively to the long journey to the distant estate. But the main thing was that I was to go—that was obvious, otherwise there would have been no need for all those detailed travel particulars, contrasting oddly with the vagueness of the rest. I supposed the words "renewing the association" referred to my library work, and meant that I was to act as librarian again, though it was really far from clear. Not a word was said about salary either, or when I was to start work—

"It doesn't matter," I thought exultingly, too excited to keep my feelings in check any longer. "Nothing matters except that I'm going, and that he really is my friend!"

But a moment later exhilaration was swamped by the mysterious restraining influence I had already felt: it seemed quite unaccountable now, until I wondered if this persistent notion that I ought not to embark on the project could be the outcome of unconscious superstition. Perhaps, after my many misfortunes, I was afraid to accept, even in the privacy of my thoughts, the prospect of a happier future. At any rate, I could find no more likely solution of the problem, which had absorbed me to the exclusion of the outer world. Returning now to my surroundings, I received an unpleasant shock.

Just for an instant, I seemed to be face to face with

the Administrator himself; the face was the same . . . yet unspeakably different . . . deprived by some nightmare mutilation of all humanity. When it dawned on me that I was confronting the damaged face of the angel I myself had made, all my high spirits came flooding back. "How dare you give me such a fright?" I said to the image. "You can grow yourself a new face by the morning!" In reality, it never occurred to me not to repair the damage, and I now set to, and worked steadily, far into the night.

At last, after a critical survey, I decided I'd done all I could. How wonderful that I never need come here again! Hurrying out of the dark building, I thought with amusement of the proprietor's rage when he discovered that I was missing. For once the mean petty tyrant would be getting what he deserved. But I was too happy to feel really bitter; I only wanted to forget this place, and all its associations.

I took nothing away with me but my paintbox, which, before I conscripted it for the purpose of earning my living, had been the companion of many agreeable leisure hours. Now I was about to return to a life that would again include leisure, and pleasure too. My spirit seemed to give a sudden great bound, leaping out of this present ugliness and sordid poverty, back to where it belonged: forgetting how tired I was, I went swinging along the street with the same buoyant step of my optimistic youth. At this hour, the streets were quite empty; but had they been thronged with all fortune's favourites, I would not have changed places with any one of them.

TWO

I found I could just afford the cheapest rail ticket; flying was out of the question. As it was, I had so little cash left after paying my fare that I dared not engage a porter at the various stations where I had to change, but dragged my suitcase myself from one train to the next. It seemed to grow heavier each time I picked it up; and, as the long tiring journey went on, I became more and more thankful that it was my sole piece of luggage.

I was standing among other weary travellers at one of the many halts, when the station lights suddenly came on, drawing a startled exclamation from a respectable looking middle-aged woman beside me. Her face, and that of her much younger companion, seemed vaguely familiar, and I wondered in passing where I could have seen them.

Night travel had always been something of an ordeal to me; and now, in my not very robust state of health, worn down by continuous overwork, full of suppressed excitement and unacknowledged anxiety, I could scarcely drag my case on to the platform for what seemed the hundredth time, and being told I would have to wait, put it down, thankful for the brief rest. Almost immediately then, I heard running steps, a soft bulky form cannoned into me from behind; I turned, and, with a faint sense of nightmare, recognized the elder of the

two women I had already noticed.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir," she began at once, in a flurry of agitation. "But you went off so quickly . . . I . . . we . . . we were afraid of losing you altogether."

"Losing me? What the hell do you mean?" I demanded. "Why are you following me about?" Before she could answer, a general forward movement compelled me to pick up my case, and, by the time I got on to the platform, I'd almost forgotten her, stupefied by fatigue. But here the younger woman hurried up to me, saying, "Please don't be angry with my mother . . . she didn't mean any harm . . ."

Everything appeared slightly distorted to me just then. I saw the station as the garishly lit shrine of some cult, dedicated to the huge iron monsters, bellowing peremptorily at the timid subservient humans, who flocked to and fro in obedient herds. Against this satanic background, the stereotyped prettiness of the girl's painted face had the appeal of a frivolous fragile toy, decorative, trivial, and somehow pathetic: which didn't prevent me from saying crossly, "You've got a nerve, both of you, following me, bumping into me, and then telling me not to object . . ." The train had just come in sight, and I fixed my eyes on it; my attention was already starting to leave her, when I heard:

"I don't see why you should mind. It's a compliment really. We saw you were an experienced traveller. And knowing we'd never manage on our own, when we heard you ask for the place we're going to we decided to do whatever you did."

"Using me as a free guide, eh?" I said mechanically, my eyes still on the approaching train.

"Well, why not? You'd have had to ask just the same if we hadn't been following, wouldn't you?"

For a second I was amused, as by the sharpness of a precocious child. But I was incapable of thinking of more than one thing at a time among the monstrous echoes that screamed and clanked in the sulphurous air of that high-roofed hall. As the huge locomotive bore down upon us, grinding slowly alongside, I forgot the girl's existence, my head filled with the single idea of finding a seat in the crowded train. I hurried almost the whole length of it before discovering some empty places, one of which I hastily took, just as a bell began ringing to announce the train's departure.

At the very last moment then, to my horror, the door opened again; in burst my two unwelcome followers, apparently pushed from behind by a porter, showering bags, wraps and parcels all over the carriage. As we jerked into motion, a glossy magazine fell into my lap, and, as if this were the very last straw, I hurled it to the ground, wishing I could push the pair out on to the line. To this day I don't know why I was so infuriated that I shouted, "For heaven's sake, go to another compartment and leave me in peace!" Immediately afterwards, feeling ashamed and bewildered by my own bad temper, to avoid the eyes fixed on me, I bent down to retrieve the magazine, which had rolled under the seat, while the girl shrilly retorted, "We've as much right here as you have!"

I straightened up and offered her the paper with a muttered apology, terrified that she would make a scene, and genuinely perplexed by my own rudeness. Simultaneously deciding that to risk not finding another seat

would be preferable to enduring recriminations for the rest of the journey, I began to collect my belongings and stood up, muttering something about relieving them of my presence. To my amazement, the young woman pushed me back into my place, smiling with perfect good humour and saying, "Oh, let's forget it! You had a grievance against us before; now we have one against you—that makes us quits."

I was too surprised to be able to think of any reply. But, quite unperturbed, she settled herself beside me, and, bringing a mirror out of her bag, began to study her face exhaustively from every angle; while I gradually recovered my equilibrium, resigning myself to these two odd companions—I couldn't prevent them from attaching themselves to me, in any case.

In my gratitude to the girl for overlooking my uncivilized conduct, I made an effort to conquer my tiredness and speak a few conventional sentences; which started her off on an endless flow of chatter. Improbable as it seemed, she appeared to have taken a fancy to me. I got the impression she'd been looking out for a chance to speak. But I was far too tired to respond to her interest. Hardly even following what she was saying, I only heard inconsecutive snatches of her involved story of winning a hair-dressing competition, entitling her to compete in the international contest, to which she was on her way. I was only dimly aware that the tone of her talk by degrees got less cheerful, and less assured; until she concluded dismally, "Oh dear! I'm beginning to wish we could go home again! I've never been so far away before . . . Suppose I'm a flop at the end of it all? We've got to stay three whole weeks——"

Her doleful apprehensive voice pierced the apathy of my fatigue, and I managed to say, "Cheer up! Everything will be all right; you're sure to be a success and make lots of friends——" as if encouraging a child going to school for the first time.

In the process of reviving her spirits, I felt my own rise. When she started for home in three weeks' time, I would be quite at home in my new life, accepted, secure once again. While the train roared through the dark, long after the little hairdresser had fallen asleep, I sat beside her, walking in imagination through the pleasant landscape of a prosperous future, oblivious of the passing hours.

At last I too slept, refusing to be roused by people who stumbled over my legs and pushed past me, until, in a loud voice the girl told me to wake up as we had almost arrived at our destination. Laboriously struggling back to consciousness then, I was at first dazed by the heat and noise. So many people were standing that I couldn't see out, and only gradually realized I had come to a climate very different from the winter I had left behind—here it seemed to be full summer. The train was slowing down already. And suddenly a door along the corridor was thrown open, and the heavy staleness of crowded sleepers invaded by the exciting atmosphere of a new town. A porter appeared, and collected, at tremendous speed, all the luggage in the compartment, hurling out of the window the cases he couldn't carry, of which mine was one. This finally had the effect of bringing me wide awake. In my concern for the object I had dragged so far and with so much labour, I at last jumped up, and pushed my way into the corridor.

I was uncomfortably aware of my dishevelled state, which was not improved by a white fur, thrust upon me as I was leaving the train, with the words, "Just hold this for a minute, will you?" the owner vanishing into the crowd before I could protest.

I forgot about her at once, re-entangled in the residue of my dreams, half believing myself to be still asleep, when I saw what looked like a deputation arriving to meet me, reproducing exactly that situation in which the dreamer has to face a crowd while stark naked, or in the most unsuitable attire. But obviously there were real people advancing, greatly inconveniencing the passengers trying to collect their baggage from the pile dumped on the platform.

The sun was blazing down out of a cloudless sky; but now a curious flicker ran over the brilliant face of the day, the strong sunshine appeared to wink. I caught sight, at the same moment, of press photographers with their apparatus, and of my suitcase, after which I dived into the shifting pile of luggage; but, burdened with coats, took some time to retrieve it. When I next looked up, the photographers were posing a group of civic notabilities wearing symbols of office, with some children who held a banner, on which were the words, WELCOME, MISS HAIR DRESSING, over my friend from the train. *She* had had the sense to prepare for the change of temperature, I observed, and was looking miraculously cool and fresh in a light summer dress, as she smiled at the cameras.

So that explained the presence of all these people; they were here in her honour. Of course, I had never really believed for an instant that they could have come

to meet me; and yet I felt slightly mortified. Suddenly I wanted to get away from the whole situation. Seeing the mother's familiar stout form, I forced her to take the coat, then hurried off, pursued by a persistent press-man who wanted to get me into another picture, under the impression that I was one of the party.

I escaped him by diving into a cloakroom. But, though I badly needed a wash, didn't dare to stay there more than a minute, for fear of missing anybody who might have come to meet me. However, when I re-emerged, it was immediately evident that no such person was present. A clean sweep had taken place during my brief absence, the station was quite deserted, its platforms lying blank in the sun. Far away where the glittering rails converged, a diminishing smoke-plume was the only sign of the departed train. And, outside the station, broad stretches of sunshine were equally blank; except where, in the distance, the tail end of the procession was vanishing into the town, the banner bobbing about like a toy balloon; suddenly, it vanished too—I was left standing there quite alone.

Now the stillness leapt at me after the clattering jolting journey. I could hear the wind rustling the leaves of some dusty-looking trees on the other side of the station yard; the indeterminate murmuring sounds of the town seemed to come from somewhere immeasurably remote. Suddenly beginning to see things differently, at the secret dream level, I had an uneasy impression of having been left behind, not just by the train and the people, but by everything—by life itself. The sun-bleached buildings, the empty stretches of blazing sunshine, arid and lion-coloured, took on an ominous

strangeness, as of incipient nightmare. Yet I was still fully conscious of the daytime world: and, for the two realities to exist like this contemporaneously, seemed most disconcerting. Since the everyday life of work, sleep, food, etc. had to go on, I'd accustomed myself to thinking of the other dream life as episodic, and limited in its appearances to the absence of the so-called real—either the dream world must be real, or the facts of life were; yet here they were, both together . . .

Wandering uneasily in front of the station, I passed a projecting wall, and saw a huge striped umbrella, faded by the sun, sheltering a flower-seller and her stall. She and I were the only two human beings in all that sunny desolation, and, on a sudden impulse, thinking I saw her smile, I went across and asked if she'd seen anybody from the Administrator's establishment that morning.

"No," she answered, as promptly and calmly as if she'd been expecting the question. "None of his people have been here today."

I don't know why the positive tone of her reply should have perturbed me. I was trying to concentrate on the ordinary concrete plane; but the hidden face of appearances kept coming through, confusing me by its suggestion of a dual reality. Everything seemed to mean something else, and I was too tired and muddled to distinguish which meaning was real.

"How can you be so certain?" I asked, envying her the singleness and clarity of her vision, as, without hesitation, she told me, "Naturally, all of us in the town know everybody at Eagles' Nest."

"Eagles' Nest . . . so that's what it's called . . ." I didn't realize I had spoken aloud, until the flower-seller

—who all along seemed to have found me rather amusing—suddenly burst out laughing. "You *must* have come from the back of beyond not to know that," she said, not offensively, but with the directness of an unspoiled peasant, who has never learned the finesses of polite conversation. Though I knew she didn't mean any harm, I found her candid gaze somewhat embarrassing. My own imitation of her frankness was not a success, when I said, "Yes, I'm a stranger here. I hoped somebody would meet me . . . now I'll have to find my own way to Eagles' Nest—perhaps you can tell me how to get there?"

"Oh, that's easy enough; you must take a taxi." Giving me a sharp glance, she added, "But I thought you came with Miss Hairdressing?"

"Yes, of course I came by the same train," I replied: and then, belatedly suspicious, asked, "What makes you connect me with the hair-dressing girl?"

I was alarmed by the slowness of my reactions. The situation was all the while slipping away from me. I was no longer in full command of my brain, which, besides being dulled by fatigue, was continuously confused by the strangeness of everything in sight.

As if from far away, I heard her say, "Sitting here, I can't help seeing what goes on at the station," and made a terrific effort to collect myself, clenching my hands, surprised to find them damp with sweat. But the effect was the reverse of what I hoped and intended; the scene started to swing round me in a great blazing circle, with the flower-seller in the middle, her brown face split by a row of dazzling white teeth, like a toothpaste advertisement. As I had wanted to get away from the spot where

the photograph was being taken, I now wanted—but much more urgently—to escape from this particular corner of the station yard, where I fancied the heat concentrated, intensified by the highly coloured and scented flowers . . . they must be to blame, I decided, for my suddenly feeling sick and dizzy; for my vagueness and muddled thoughts. Without really knowing what I was doing, I pulled a handful of miscellaneous objects out of my pocket, chose one of the few remaining coins, and put it down on the edge of the stall.

"Look out, or you'll drop something!"

The woman's exclamation made me aware of how carelessly I was stuffing my belongings into my pocket again. For an instant, I seemed, out of the corner of my eye, to catch sight of something white fluttering through the air. But the world was still unstable, circling round me, swaying and rolling; I concluded, since nothing seemed to be missing, that I must have imagined the white object, which was no longer anywhere to be seen—in any case, I now forgot all about it, in the excitement of hearing, "Look, here's a taxi coming!"

Immediately I was impatient, longing to get away. The scene for the moment had steadied itself, and I eagerly started towards the distant car, now approaching the station.

"Wait a bit! What's the hurry?" the flower seller teased me. "Eagles' Nest hasn't got wings—it won't fly away!" Getting up, she planted herself right in front of me so that I couldn't pass, trying to make me accept some of her flowers, which she said I had paid for, forcing me to explain that the coin had been merely a sign of goodwill. "At least, you must have a button-hole,"

she insisted, fastening a big white full-blown rose on my lapel, so that I must have looked like a guest at a country wedding.

I didn't care, I hardly noticed what she was doing, obsessed by all-consuming anxiety, for I had the idea that some nameless disaster would occur unless I secured this particular taxi, now pulling up under the tree. To my horror, I saw a woman in a grey dress walking across the previously deserted expanse of sunshine. Suppose she were to take it before I got there?

The flower seller was still fiddling with my lapel, holding on to me so that I couldn't move. But now I simply couldn't bear to be detained any longer. Oblivious of everything but my obsessional need to get to the taxi, I put my hands on her hips, and shifted her to one side, in the same impersonal way I'd have moved one of my plaster figures, and, without even looking to see how she reacted to such summary treatment, seized my suitcase and rushed off, shouting, "Taxi!" and wildly waving my free hand, the case banging against me at every step.

The woman in grey seemed to evaporate; I got no further glimpse of her, she was nowhere to be seen, when, panting and drenched with sweat, I reached the car, hurled my suitcase inside and fell in after it, calling out "Eagles' Nest!" with what seemed like my last breath.

THREE

The taxi started to move.

Sprawling on the seat, practically in a state of collapse, I saw the driver reach back and slam the door I'd left unfastened. Although I was feeling more dead than alive, I also noticed that he was watching me in the driving mirror, and, not wanting him to think there was anything wrong, managed to heave myself up into a more conventional sitting posture. After this, some more minutes passed before I recovered sufficiently to take any interest in where we were going. But, when I did look out, the breath-taking strangeness of the view immediately made me forget my exhaustion.

The town had already been left behind. I confronted a scene of primitive wildness, a huge savage vista of rocks and mountains, quite unlike anything I had ever seen. The road, now starting up into the foothills, was visible in endless climbing loops far ahead, winding its way through a wilderness of weird crags, their shapes fantastic beyond belief, all seared to the same fierce lion tint by the blazing sun. Everything was arid, inhuman, enormous and elemental, like a scene from some earlier stage of the planet's long life. Instead of a softening heat haze, a hard electrical shimmer distorted perspective and played tricks on the eye, making it impossible to judge distances.

I felt I could have put out my hand and touched the

volcanic hills, rising like islands from this unstable brilliance, mirages floating in the transparent dazzle. Beyond them, nothing was to be seen but mountains, all of the same stark, forbidding outline, flat-topped, rectilinear, savagely coloured and depthless-looking, as if painted on the cobalt sky; crowding one behind another like a gigantic city of vast skyscrapers, or a monstrous cemetery of colossal coffins stood up on end. There was something frighteningly strange about these angular identical mountains, so different from the grandeur of the snow-capped mountains I knew, and seeming to have no life or soul, as they stretched away to infinity, range beyond range, gruesome in their impressiveness, overpowering, a horror of dead rock.

In the foreground too there was only rock: boulders heaped up in frenzied confusion, in imitation of every imagineable and unimagineable form, a chaos of the grotesque, the obscene, the horrific, the mad, an exhibition of insane statuary, producing an almost terrifying effect on me in my exhausted condition; I could hardly bear to look, repelled by the extraordinary bizarre agitation of the lifeless stone.

My own state of mind was certainly not very normal that day. I hardly knew whether I had been travelling for hours, days or weeks, and this astonishing scenery at the end of my journey almost made me wish I had not come. I thought it was a place for eagles, not men, wondering what could have induced the Administrator's ancestors to make their home in this stony desert, where the toughest form of life could barely survive. I saw neither birds nor animals. Only a few dark clots of bushes clung precariously to the screes, though we passed

an occasional isolated tree specimen of a weird white-leaved local species unknown to me, standing like a ghost tree, an arboreal skeleton contributing by its unnatural pallor to the suggestion of deathliness underlying the whole desolate vista of rock. Unwilling to see any more of it, I shut my eyes, and limply lay back in the corner of the taxi.

But I was soon forced to pay attention again, when the car swerved so sharply that I was almost thrown off the seat. A new sort of mirage seemed to confront me outside. Seven great crests, shaped like wigged judges, sat in the sky, with robes of rich green falling in velvet folds to their feet: lush fields and orchards, plantations and vineyards, improbable as an Eden in this desolation of stone.

This vegetation was a distinct improvement on the bare barren boxlike mountains and crowds of distorted rocks; but one of them must be an illusion—they couldn't both be true at the same time. I sat looking out, waiting for the greenery to disappear; which it confusingly failed to do. To my bewilderment, the judge-like summits continued to brood over the scene; while the taxi turned into what looked like a private drive, bordered by tall spreading trees of a most lifelike appearance. Their dense dark green foliage converted the road into a shady tunnel of coolness; and the lower temperature, making me feel more myself, slowly convinced me of the reality of my present surroundings.

Between the trunks of the trees I caught glimpses of groves of olives and citrus fruits; and presently gardens appeared, elaborately laid out with great banks of flowers, fantastic masses of colour, such as I had never

before seen. Numbers of dark skinned peasants were at work here; but these human beings seemed less important, their presence made less impression on me, than the abundance of water, everywhere much in evidence; which, because of the burnt-up desolation all round, seemed to acquire a mystical character; a forceful life of its own, instead of passively reflecting its surroundings.

"Well, what do you think of it?" the driver called out, startling me out of my confused thoughts. Apparently not satisfied by my "Magnificent," the man went on: "These gardens are world-famous—people come thousands of miles to see them . . ." I could well believe it: but said nothing, partly because I wanted to be allowed to form my own impressions without interruption; partly because of a wave of almost intolerable sweetness, which was just then making my head feel heavy and numb—it came, I fancied, from the dense white velvet trumpets of a creeper in full bloom which covered a wall we were passing.

It was a relief when the perfume was left behind. The taxi had turned another corner, and now I saw before us a huge mass of rock looming up like a fortification, presumably having broken away from the mountain beyond. That it could be anything but another of the strange stone travesties of the region never entered my head, until the taxi man announced, "Eagles' Nest!" and pulled up in front of it.

Even now I couldn't really believe I had got to my destination. For some time I fancy I must have been slightly feverish, and today's events had from the start seemed wildly improbable. The secret and the everyday plane intermingling, had created a queer dreamlike

atmosphere. And this fortlike excrescence of the living rock, coming at the end of the amazing drive, was merely the climax of the unlikely. Now my eyes were discovering doors in the dark depths of what I'd taken to be the opening of a cave—So the place really had been constructed by human beings . . . Still gazing dubiously at this dark entry, I told myself, "So I've actually got here . . ." as though I had never really expected to arrive.

This was the place where I was to find the happiness of my dreams. But they had grown faint and far off, leaving me alone with the fact of arrival. "There's no connection," I thought, surveying the huge fragment of rock, barricaded against the heat—how could my happiness come out of that? What did come, was a curious moment of imbalance, not unlike an optical illusion; as if the world, on an inclined plane, were letting everything slide a little away from me. And, on the new axis thus formed, something negative seemed to emerge, wafted towards me . . . a shadow, or a breath of the misfortune by which I had been condemned. My dreams would not come true, here or anywhere else. Then the world levelled again, I was not sure what had happened . . . if anything had.

Getting out of the taxi, deliberately counting coins into the driver's outstretched hand, I was gratified to discover that I possessed exactly the right number of them to pay the fare. Having done so, I stepped back, and waited for the hand to be withdrawn and the car driven away. But neither of these things happened. Instead, a harsh voice said: "What about the tip?"

Now I was startled, not so much by the unexpected-

ness of the disagreeable voice, as by the fact that I myself had quite overlooked this point. Glancing at the driver's face, which I seemed not to have seen properly until this moment, I was still more taken aback: it was the face of a stage brigand, garnished by a long curly moustache; a face so theatrical-seeming that I hastily looked away in a kind of embarrassment, wondering if I could have imagined it. To gain time, I slowly and carefully went through the pretence of searching my empty pockets, one of which I finally pulled inside-out, with the words: "I'm afraid you're going to be unlucky about the tip. You can see for yourself that I'm absolutely cleaned out . . ." I said this quite naturally, and even smiled slightly, because, having no idea what to do, to behave naturally seemed as good as any other line of conduct.

How hot it was! And now a wandering breeze brought a whiff of heavy fragrance . . . its potency affected me like a veil blowing across the face of my consciousness. "It must be those white flowers again . . ." I thought, gazing in mild surprise at the taxi man's moustache, which was starting to undulate in a peculiar way, waving to and fro like the tentacles of an octopus. With sudden alarm, I realized that this phenomenon was due to my own slight sensation of faintness . . . if only a good strong wind would dispel the cloying sweetness in the air . . . it seemed almost as powerful as an anaesthetic . . . heavy langour was stealing over me. I couldn't fight against such lassitude, my legs gave way, I sank down on the suitcase, letting my head fall forward into my hands, but without losing consciousness altogether.

Somewhere far overhead I heard voices trumpeting . . . I knew I was still between the entrance to Eagles' Nest and the taxi . . . the driver of which was talking to a man, wearing a butler's black coat, who had appeared in the doorway: "—tore up as if the police were after him, and told me to drive him here," were the words I heard.

"Then you can just drive him away again," the tall supercilious fellow drawled ironically, moving as if to shut the door and exclude us both. Whereupon the other set up a terrific outcry, protesting that he, a poor man, couldn't be expected to drive people about the countryside for nothing, and that I was probably a dangerous criminal, who would slit his throat and leave him to die in the ditch, while I drove off in the car to perpetrate further crimes.

"He doesn't look very dangerous at the moment," the butler said drily. Immediately afterwards, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and glanced up hopefully, thinking I was to receive assistance at last. But I was merely pulled up a little way and then released so abruptly that I slumped back into my former position. "There, you see . . . he's as weak as a wood-louse . . ." The contemptuous comment plunged me into despair . . . I had been delivered utterly into the hands of these two villains . . . I felt helpless as if I were in a bad dream.

The taxi man was consenting, "for a consideration, of course, and to save the Administrator any unpleasantness," to drive me back to the town. As I heard this, a sudden chance current of cooler unscented air came to revive me; pushing back the hair from my damp forehead, I sat up straight. What was the matter with me?

Had I lost control of my faculties so completely that I was going to give in without a struggle? Again the moustache caught my eye, like something from a box of stage props—was I going to let myself be finished off by this precious pair; a mountebank, a tenth-rate actor, and a conceited flunky?

"The letter!" I suddenly exclaimed quite loudly and clearly, so that both my hearers looked at me in surprise. Suddenly remembering that I could prove my right to be here, I started feeling through my pockets again; all at once I had the upper hand . . . "The secretary's letter, telling me to come . . . I've got it somewhere . . ." I had the satisfaction of seeing that I'd disconcerted the butler by these words. But I couldn't press my advantage, for faintness was again coming over me . . . everything was receding . . . darkening . . . and in my head a continuous thumping, pounding, suggested that the train wheels were still revolving around my skull. Struggling to hold back my escaping consciousness, I fixed my eyes on the black-coated form above me . . . which seemed to melt into another figure, also in black . . . which I had faced on a former occasion as the representative of hostile authority.

Though the black-robed verger never became distinct in my memory, I was carried back now to the distant abbey and the faces of the angels I hadn't seen . . . they seemed all about me in the incense-heavy dark . . . though still invisible, they were just at hand, as if waiting outside a door that I might be able to open. But, at the same time, the strange and powerful impression made upon me by Eagles' Nest still endured, even in semi-consciousness. Through night's thinning meshes,

I saw the fragment-like mass looming up, its proportions magnified and distorted to the size of the mountainous judges leaning over its shoulder. Darkness was dispersing . . . but, though every moment the shapes of reality grew more distinct, the nearness of the unseen faces, or rather, of one particular face, seemed no less real. The presence of an angelic visitor had become so vivid to me that I could look, almost without surprise, from the sunshine and shapes of the concrete world, to the countenance suddenly appearing high above me . . . that fabulous but not unfamiliar face, almost translucent, through which shone an austere and unearthly light . . . the radiance, as it seemed, of eternity.

I said to myself "I remember . . ." though I did not in fact recall precisely any earlier vision. It was more as if the angel had been out of sight for a while, and now opened the door, to stand remembered in the absolute certainty of my recognition. But . . . there was the angel . . . and there was the everyday world . . . and I felt dimly that this was not as it should be; that the one should not be as real as the other: and my glance left celestial brightness for the sun's glare . . . searching the rocks and leaves; the figures; the taxi; the house . . . all the daytime objects surrounding me on the concrete level . . . trying vainly to find something compatible with the irrational and unmistakable face of my luminous dream-guest—Suddenly I saw the link, everything fitted together, slipped perfectly into place. At this moment, and in my peculiar mental state, I seemed to have perceived a tremendous truth; though whether it would have appeared the same in other circumstances, or at a different time, was uncertain to me, even then.

For the present, at any rate, everything was explained by the statement: "They are one . . ." I felt a wave of wonderful happiness, seeing my friend and patron standing there in celestial splendour, brighter than the sunshine. The recognition had come with such certainty that I wasn't even surprised, I seemed to have known it all along; the knowledge had been temporarily inaccessible, that was all.

I wanted nothing to do with anything but my vision. I was perfectly happy, rapt, as I gazed at this mysterious amalgam of benefactor and heavenly guest . . . the personification in one resplendent figure of all my dream-heroes. But I couldn't exclude interference from the material plane, growing all the time more assertive . . . forcing irrelevant trivialities on my notice. Against my will, I was made aware of the butler stooping to retrieve my overcoat from the ground, where it appeared to have fallen, giving it an occasional shake or pat, as if to remove the dust, as he spoke to his master. And the more I saw of the world to which the butler belonged, the less I saw of the angel . . . which seemed to be retiring deeper and deeper into the man . . . until I'd lost sight of it altogether; only the eyes, blazing with a brilliance almost frightening, continued to bear witness to the presence within.

But this brilliance, now that it was directed upon me, had the blinding effect of a searchlight's beam, coming between me and any kind of sureness. I no longer felt sure of what I had seen, or of what I expected to see, in the lean agreeable face of my ex-employer. Why was I myself sitting here gaping at him like a fool? I struggled to speak, to stand up. But the effort was beyond me, and

I had to abandon it. As if from a long way off, I heard the well-remembered voice interrupt the butler's story with a sharp note of authority:

"Never mind that now. Get him into the house."

The Administrator's tall form seemed to be swinging across the sky like the mast of a rolling ship, as, helpless and speechless, I watched the approach of a telegraph-pole crowned with a chauffeur's cap. In this undignified style I was obliged to enter my new life, held up like a sack between butler and chauffeur, the grotesque white rose still stuck in my buttonhole, though half its petals had gone.

Realizing vaguely how absurd I must look, I knew that I ought to be feeling ashamed. But I was too far gone to feel or think anything more. I surrendered myself passively to the strong arms of my supporters, hearing the Administrator's indulgent voice say: "In you go, you disreputable-looking fellow," as they steered me through the dark porch.

FOUR

Weakness had merely postponed the feeling of shame, which struck me like a blow as soon as I woke from a long sleep. What an appalling start I had made in my new job, my new life, was the first thought that came to me in the very moment of waking. If only I could somehow undo all that had happened . . . go back, and begin again . . . But the hours of deep sleep had done me good, and, with resolute commonsense, I told myself that it was futile to waste one's energy regretting what was done and could not be altered.

Sitting up to inspect my surroundings, I was taken aback by the size and magnificence of the room; everything about it suggested one of the main bedrooms of the house, destined to be occupied by important guests—it was certainly far too grand for a librarian's use. I couldn't help being faintly disquieted by such splendour. But I told myself that the servants must have deposited me in the first room they came to, and, pretending to be reassured, turned my attention to the view from the window. From where I was, I could see the higher slopes of the garden, where many revolving sprays showered their bright drops over flowers and leaves in a mellow sunset glow.

So I had slept through the entire day . . . this too I found slightly disturbing. But my thoughts were distracted, first by a sensation of hunger, and, immediately

afterwards, by the discovery of a tray at my bedside, with sandwiches and a thermos flagon of coffee. I had been out of touch with wealth and luxury for so long that, forgetting how such details are often a mere matter of staff routine, I saw this as evidence of the Administrator's personal interest in my welfare, and at once forgot everything but my own gratitude and devotion. With passionate loyalty I dedicated my whole future to my beloved patron, who already seemed to have done far more for me than I could ever repay. Though I had no clear recollection of my experiences on the secret plane, and could not actually remember my curious dual vision, I now felt deeply moved; and aware of a peculiar sense of rightness—as though I had at last set out on the road I should have been following from the start. I could accept this feeling without understanding it in the least, because understanding was unnecessary; it included an element of absolute trust, as well as one of exhilaration. All the time I was eating the sandwiches, enchanted wings seemed simultaneously to uplift and protect me. But this wonderful carefree feeling ended with the last mouthful: and, as I put down my cup, empty, the magic wings silently flapped away.

Now in the hushed grandeur of the big room, I saw approaching me the moment when I would have to take some kind of action. I looked at the door, which had an air of leading to uncertainties I did not wish to explore. I felt a distinct reluctance to penetrate any further into the unknown house, and, to put off the moment a little longer, went to look out of the window.

The sun was on the point of setting; but its oblique rays still gilded the heights of the garden, struck rain-

bows from the moving showers, and pierced burning holes in the deep shade already covering the slopes lower down. The beauty of the scene was arresting; yet its impact was not altogether agreeable: I found that I was repelled as well as charmed. From the window's height, I seemed to be looking down on something unreal, fabulous as a dream; a dream that might easily turn into a nightmare. It was lovely beyond words; yet there was something strange and disturbing—even faintly sinister—about its utter stillness, which gave the same suggestion of lifelessness so noticeable in the mountain landscape. My eyes were drawn to the water, for nothing else seemed really alive. I heard no birds, no voices. Only the water whispered incessantly, weaving its fugitive patterns on empty air. Suddenly I had the impression that I was looking at something dead—entombed in its own perfection, as if the sunset radiance were a kind of embalming fluid. I remembered the peasants I had seen at work, but found it quite impossible to bring back their figures in my imagination. There was a sterility in the excessive perfection of the scene, that made it impossible to imagine people laughing and talking out there, or picking the flowers. The garden was like a picture, finalized, and beyond possibility of further development . . . dead as the stone monstrosities of the mountainside, and, in its way, no less monstrous . . .

With an effect of abrupt suddenness, the sun disappeared, and I turned back to the room, suddenly cold, thinking, "It's time I got dressed." What *was* the time? My watch had stopped, there was no clock in the room, no sound gave a clue to activities in other parts of the house. Silence, absolute and apparently unbreakable,

covered everything like a transparent dome. I began to look for my clothes, opening the enormous cupboards, pulling out drawers; but everything seemed to have been taken away. I found only hangers and aromatic sachets in the sweet-smelling cedar-lined closets, large enough to have hidden a horse and rider and all their equipment with ease.

The obvious thing was to ring the bell; but the butler was sure to have put the rest of the staff against me, and I didn't feel I could cope with their hostility at the moment. Realizing that this was a mere convenient rationalization, I saw how essential it was for me to speak to the Administrator at once, and to counteract the bad impression I must have made on arrival. I must convince him that I could be trusted to act sensibly and correctly, and that my lapse had been due solely to the fatigue of the long journey. Already too much time had been wasted. I ought not to have been sleeping away the hours, leaving unchallenged the butler's version of what had occurred. Unless I presented my side of the case immediately, the idea that I had arrived the worse for drink would become fixed in the minds of all concerned.

With a sudden deceptive show of determination, I pressed my finger upon the bell. The man who entered a few moments later wore a white uniform and belonged—unlike the butler and chauffeur—to the same dark skinned peasant class as the flower seller outside the station. But where she had spoken to me with perfect fluency and assurance, the servant appeared to have difficulty with the language, though his attitude was the reverse of hostile. His humility seemed obviously and even painfully genuine, as, with lowered eyes and hands

meekly clasped, he explained laboriously that the clothes had been taken away to be cleaned and pressed, and would be brought back in the morning.

"In the morning!" I exclaimed, disconcerted. "What am I going to wear now?"

As the man evidently took this for a rebuke, beginning a nervous apology, I smiled and said jokingly: "You don't expect me to go down in my pyjamas, do you?" His downcast mien had already made me uncomfortable and I only wanted to reassure him.

"The master thought you would dine up here," the valet answered, unsmiling, in the same humble way as before. "He thought you would be too tired to come downstairs." Having spoken these words much more clearly, as if he had memorized them, he went away; returning immediately with a trolley on which a light supper was laid out.

I was no longer hungry, and only swallowed a few mouthfuls when he left me alone. I felt too worried and anxious to eat. It had occurred to me that the Administrator might be deliberately confining me to my room, afraid I would disgrace myself again, perhaps before visitors this time. Troubled and uncertain, I began pacing up and down; at one moment glad I need not appear; the next, feeling that my prestige was being damaged irreparably while I stayed up here. Ought I to insist on going down? My head ached with the burden of indecision. "I'll wait till the man comes back for the trolley, and then get him to ask the Administrator to see me later on." This seemed a reasonable compromise, on which it was permissible to lie down and relax. I only meant to shut my eyes for a few moments,

but almost at once I again fell fast asleep.

I next woke with the impression of having slept several hours. The trolley had gone; and, in addition to this change, the room seemed different in a way I could not immediately define. Vexed with myself for thus losing all hope of seeing my patron before morning, I got up and wandered restlessly to the window. But here a wave of the exotic flower perfume met me, oppressively sweet, and reminding me of those powerfully scented flowers which, at funerals, mask the odours of corruption. The black, silver-touched masses of foliage outside seemed funereal too; the whole night resembled a vast catafalque; upon which I turned my back.

Now I went to examine a picture I hadn't noticed before, painted in very dark colours; in the dim light of the bedside lamp I couldn't even make out what it was supposed to represent. But suddenly I was convinced that it had not been there when I fell asleep, and its presence accounted for my feeling that something had changed in the room. But what an absurd idea; why should anyone come in and hang up a picture while I was asleep? It couldn't have been done without considerable noise, which would have woken me anyhow; a nail could sleep through a noise like that. But for some reason I couldn't get the thought out of my head, the picture kept coming into my dreams: at a moment of wakefulness I decided to study it closely first thing in the morning.

Even in broad daylight, however, it was difficult to make out anything more than that it was a portrait. The

sombre rich background colours seemed to obscure the outline of the face, which was further obscured by an intricate tracery of lines, as though it were behind a veil. For an instant the sun rested upon it . . . revealing a luminous high-cheek-boned face that seemed strangely familiar, startling me like a shout, although it belonged to no human being. Then the sunlight moved on; my angle of vision altered; I was confronting the face which had looked up at me so startlingly from the verger's card . . . it startled me again now. For a second I felt the shadow of something hugely significant and mysterious. But then the situation returned to the daytime level. Out of my confused impressions there was left only the resemblance to the face of the stained-glass window; which wasn't particularly remarkable, since these windows were very well-known—reproductions of them were to be found everywhere.

Vaguely annoyed with myself for seeing signs and portents where none existed, I was glad to be distracted by the arrival of the valet with my clothes. In an attempt to establish friendly relations, I asked the man's name, and was told "Upjohn," in a voice that discouraged further advances. The peasant seemed less responsive than ever this morning; either he was a surly fellow, or the language was really beyond him. Anyhow, I soon sent him away.

Although I felt more self-possessed now that I was clean, rested and decently dressed; although I told myself it was absurd; I still experienced a sense of uneasiness on leaving my room, more as if I were reconnoitering enemy territory than exploring the house that was to be my home. Knowing that I was early, as I followed

Upjohn's directions, I walked towards the dining room intentionally slowly, pausing occasionally to inspect some object that caught my eye. I met nobody; heard nothing. The house might have been deserted. Even when my watch showed that it was breakfast time, I still dawdled along, feeling rather like a new boy at a public school, afraid of accidentally violating some unknown code of behaviour. I mustn't be late and I mustn't be early; but to be precisely punctual didn't seem quite the thing either. My uncertainty made me wonder if I would ever recapture the confidence I'd once had, when I used to regard life as a room where I knew I was welcome.

I had reached an exceptionally heavy door, which could only be opened by using real force, and, in the exertion, most of my diffidence disappeared. On the other side, I found myself in a panelled gallery overlooking the central hall, as big as a church, and with the ecclesiastical suggestion accentuated by gilded organ pipes, rising to the vaulted ceiling. The whole atmosphere on this side of the door seemed subtly altered, though in a way I couldn't define. The staircase descended in two graceful winglike flights to the hall; I stood at the foot of it, lost in wonder, gazing at the precious and beautiful things all about me. As in the grounds, contrast achieved the shock-effect of the unexpected—of the magic improbable. Nothing about the exterior of the place, scarcely distinguishable from the buttresses and boulders of the mountains, gave a hint of all these treasures. Yet here again the impression I received was not predominantly pleasant. The priceless contents of the great room did not seem meant for use; they were on display, as in a museum, arranged in accordance with an

abstract decorative scheme, which even included the flowers—each bloom so perfect it appeared artificial, the stems wired and bent with exact precision, the formal vases in calculated positions. Maintaining the resemblance to a religious building, the scent of these flowers—hung heavy as incense in the abnormally still atmosphere; which now seemed to me unnaturally cool and clean, as though it had been sterilized by freezing, as well as deprived of movement.

Suddenly I jumped at the sound of my name, looking about among the bewildering ranks of treasures that filled the hall, unable at first to locate the unobtrusively-dressed young woman, who, a moment later, was accompanying me into the dining room. The only remarkable thing about her was the extreme simplicity of her white-collared grey dress, which, combined with her modest staid manner, produced an almost Quakerlike effect of sobriety and decorum. Sitting opposite her at a table which seemed intended to seat twenty people, I couldn't help smiling inwardly at the picture of our two unimpressive selves, stranded in the midst of so much grandeur.

My companion, once she'd invited me to help myself from the dishes between us, seemed to have no more to say. I wondered who she could be, slightly puzzled by her silence, which, to judge by her frequent glances, was not the result either of shyness or lack of interest. Now I got the impression that her demure aspect was misleading. Her eyes were very bright, and she had the gypsy-like complexion of all the peasants; so out of keeping with the severity of her dress that I began to see it as put on to enable her to play the unsuitable

part of a Quaker; with which these open glances were not at all in accord. They had, in fact, a boldness which, as the minutes passed and she still said nothing else, started to make me a trifle uncomfortable. I couldn't imagine what was going on in her head, and it seemed to me that she had me at a disadvantage, and was determined to make the most of the situation, enjoying herself thoroughly at my expense. Beginning to feel resentful, not wanting to be left alone with her any longer, I wondered where the Administrator could be, and why there were no servants in the room.

As though reading my thoughts, she now said: "We must have a little talk when you're ready. That's why I've sent the servants away."

I made an affirmative sound, and waited for her to go on. She, however, merely sat gazing at me with a veiled, half-smiling look that was obviously meant to be mysterious, tantalizing; a look which belonged by rights to a beautiful, sophisticated woman—on her mischievous gypsy face it was rather absurd. "She must have copied it from some film star," I thought, amused. At the same time, I was really growing rather exasperated by her behaviour, which, towards me, a stranger, could be called neither kind nor polite. Again I wondered who she might be. And again, as though by telepathy, she replied to my unspoken question. "I'm the house-secretary." This time, I was unimpressed by her thought-reading, my mind having taken a long jump to the ambiguously phrased answer to my original letter; the answer which had so inopportunistically disappeared. "So it was you—" I was going to say "Who wrote to me," but, on second thoughts, remained silent, on the defensive.

"I've got a message for you," the girl told me, after a moment. But, still unwilling to give up her advantage, she tormented me by another long pause; until, unable to maintain any longer an air of indifference to her teasing, I was forced to ask what the message was, and who had sent it.

"It's from the Administrator, of course." This she brought out with something of the triumph of a child playing a practical joke on an unsuspecting adult. But I was now unaware of anything except my own premonitory alarm, and hurriedly asked: "Shan't I see him this morning, then?"

"Not unless you hire a plane."

"What? Has he really left Eagles' Nest?" Although framed as a question this was nothing but the expression of my horror at a new stroke of bad luck, which, as I believed, could have been averted quite easily if only, instead of falling asleep, I'd insisted on seeing my patron the previous evening. To make matters worse, it seemed to me that I'd half known it at the time . . . was there some diabolical contrariness in my nature, determined to frustrate me—to ruin me altogether?

So harassed by these thoughts that I forgot where I was, I got up and started walking about the long room. frowning deeply, my hands in my pockets, my eyes on the ground. The girl at the table was a thousand miles off, I hardly heard her say, "Do sit down and finish your breakfast." Only an automatic reflex made me sit down on the chair when I found myself near it. Now the bright eyes opposite did recapture my notice, and I felt suddenly overcome by anger and indignation. Without looking to see what her real expression was, I assumed

that it corresponded with the way she'd been teasing me, and that she was watching inquisitively, gloating over the spectacle of my distress. It was infuriating to think that I'd given her this satisfaction: how could I have made such a fool of myself before her? The suppressed resentment I'd been feeling for the last few minutes suddenly burst out in the words: "The show's over now," spoken in a voice of cold rage I so seldom used that it sounded like someone else's to me. "Now perhaps you'll give me the message."

The girl looked extremely disconcerted. "Why, yes . . . of course . . . it was only that I had to tell you how sorry the chief was not to see you before he left . . . But what's wrong . . . ? I don't understand . . ." She was gazing at me with very wide open eyes; an expression I took to be a parody of childish innocence, which provoked me still further. All sorts of old grievances rose from their graves in this situation, which recalled my humiliating place in the typists' office. By giving the message to the secretary, the Administrator seemed to have made me her subordinate, reproducing the very circumstances from which I had fled. "I might as well have stayed at the store," I was thinking and then, with rather light-headed wildness: "I'll take the next train back . . ." But this of course was impossible . . . all the bridges were down behind me . . . Eagles' Nest was my very last hope. "There's nothing left for me if I fail here," I thought, and again rose to my feet, walking away from the table towards the windows that formed the end wall of the room.

I had more control over myself now that my angry bitterness had subsided into depression. For a moment I

stared out blindly at the dazzle of sun and flowers. Then, noticing that all the windows were shut, I saw here a legitimate outlet for my grievance and seized the fastening of the nearest, tugging at it violently. "Surely we might have some air in here," I protested at the same time: when the secretary interrupted, with a vehemence that amazed me: "Stop that! Leave the windows alone!"

She was standing up now, ready to rush at me if I disobeyed her. As I was far too astonished to do so, she went on more calmly, but still wearing a look of strained anxiety incomprehensible to me: "The windows aren't meant to open!" Beneath the dark complexion, her face seemed to have turned pale. She wasn't acting now, her conduct was not in the least artificial, I felt certain. What on earth was all the excitement about? In my amazement, I'd actually forgotten my own troubles as I returned to the table.

"Hadn't you noticed that all this part of the house is air conditioned?" She was rapidly recovering her composure. "It's part of my job to see that the plant is kept working properly—and of course the windows must always be shut."

Air-conditioning: so that was the explanation of the queer static atmosphere . . . of course. I looked at the girl with a more friendly eye, feeling more sympathetic towards her than I would have believed possible a few seconds earlier. "She's scared . . . someone's been bullying her . . ." As I thought this, the butler's long face floated somewhere at the back of my mind, and I felt sorry I'd lost my temper. She hadn't done anything to deserve it . . . She was just a silly girl who shouldn't

have been in the room . . . It was her presence there that had caused my bitterness; the fact that she'd seen how upset I was by the news of the Administrator's departure.

Smiling reassuringly at her now, I sat down again. Her extraordinary outburst seemed to have cleared the air between us. With a vague sense of repetition, into which I didn't bother to look, it occurred to me that, as each of us had been carried away by emotion, we were now on equal terms. I could talk without any sense of resentment: and she too seemed more at ease, her manner became much more natural, as she replied to my questions about the habits of our joint employer. "The Administrator's always coming and going . . . sometimes he's away for weeks, sometimes only days. We never know when to expect him back till the message comes to prepare his room . . ." The relationship we shared towards this third person seemed suddenly to have established a fellow feeling. Realizing that the secretary meant to be encouraging, I didn't even resent it when she said hesitantly: "You're worried about what happened yesterday when you first arrived, aren't you?" I silently nodded my head. "There's no need," she assured me, earnestly, as though she really had my welfare at heart. "The A. understands everything . . ."

But the memory of my disastrous arrival had already come between me and the speaker, who began to recede . . . to seem unimportant and far away. "If only I'd known he was leaving," I muttered my thoughts aloud.

"Probably he didn't know himself till the last moment . . ." The girl went on trying to give me the encouragement I was too worried to appreciate. I wasn't listening

to her, gradually I forgot her . . . and when a change in her voice caught my ear, I heard only her last words "—to give you this." Seeing that she was offering me an envelope, I took it from her in silence and ripped it open, still without speaking. This rudeness was quite unconscious. Nothing existed for me at that moment but the few lines written by my benefactor, telling me to consider myself a guest at Eagles' Nest until his return, and to occupy myself as I thought fit—if I needed anything from the shops in the town I could make use of the household account. Nothing could have been kinder, or more considerate; so why should my main feeling have been one of disappointment?

"Well, I can't sit here any longer. I've got work to do."

The sharpness of the secretary's voice made me aware of my rudeness, and, seeing her on her feet, I jumped up too and followed her to the door, suddenly penitent. She'd shown an interest in me and tried to cheer me up; and I'd just snubbed and ignored her . . . it was really too bad . . . I hadn't even troubled to ask her name . . . I did so now, apologizing confusedly in the same breath: "I'm sorry . . . but you must forgive me . . . it was pure absentmindedness . . . I didn't mean to be rude . . ."

With her hand already on the doorknob, she said in an odd flat voice: "I'm called Penny," taking no notice of my apology. Something in her manner struck me as peculiar; so much so that I paused, as if warned by some atavistic instinct of the presence of danger. But I was not prepared for the sudden fierceness with which she turned on me a moment later, all the violence of a

hot-blooded ancestry revealed in her voice and expression, "Why do you want to know? You're just trying to humiliate me—Oh, you're as bad as the others . . . and I'd hoped you—I thought you—Because you've been in trouble yourself, I thought you might understand—at least I didn't expect you to despise me like everyone else . . ."

Her appearance had suddenly become so wild and primitive, so ferocious, that, when she flourished something bright and slender before me, I instinctively took a step backward. I felt very foolish, seeing that it was nothing more lethal than a fountain pen. "That's why I'm called Penny, because of my job," she went on, far too excited to have noticed my withdrawal. "All the secretaries are always called Penny . . . All the local people who work here are named after what they do—Don't you see how degrading it is? How horrible? No matter how hard one tries to get on, there's always this humiliating, ignominious work name—a lable to peg one down . . . one can't ever escape it . . ." With a strangled sob, she opened the door and hurried out into the hall.

Her distraught behaviour had startled me so much that I hadn't grasped the full meaning of what she'd been saying. Although I'd followed the general drift of her words, they seemed no more than an appropriate sound-accompaniment to her extra-ordinary agitation—a sort of ranting—as if she'd been reciting fragments from a melodramatic speech. Only now that I saw her almost in tears, and noticing the school-girlish awkwardness emotion gave to her movements (for some reason it struck me as faintly touching), did I begin to wonder

whether she could have been speaking, not of some fantastic imaginary state of affairs, but of what was really happening. She was certainly behaving as though it were all true . . .

Suddenly I felt I couldn't let her go off like that, and rushed after her into the hall. "Do wait a second, I must talk to you," I called out, threading my way through the forest of magnificent furniture, which, with the fiendish obstructiveness inanimate objects so often show at critical moments, seemed to be doing its best to impede me. "Of course I don't despise you—why should I? I'm sorry if it was tactless to ask your name, but how was I to know? It's the first I've heard of this name business, and I'm absolutely astounded . . ." To my relief, the grey figure I was pursuing stopped at last in front of a lacquer screen, towering almost to the ceiling and blocking all further progress. Its enormous sable folds with gold encrustations seemed to absorb most of the light in this distant corner . . . suddenly there was a feeling of secrecy . . . of something pertaining to the deeper dream level . . . the everyday world and its sunshine seemed far away. "I can't understand the Administrator allowing such injustice to go on," I muttered, observing that Penny's brown face again looked quite pale. A pale shadow with two great black eye-holes, she now answered: "He couldn't prevent it. He's as much a victim of the system as everyone else." She spoke in a whisper, and, coming out of the heavy shadows and the feeling of secrecy, the whispered words shocked me. I didn't believe her, and to assert myself, now spoke rather louder than was strictly necessary: "But how is that possible?" In the stillness my voice sounded like a

shout. And, as if the noise had broken some spell, Penny turned to put her hand on the screen . . . which opened like a door, one of its folds swinging out, and closing again as soon as she had stepped through.

"What a silly childish trick," I thought, irritated, not so much by the vanishing trick itself, as by the sudden glimpse I had caught of a persistent vein of theatrical falseness running through the whole pattern of events since I came here, starting with the taxi driver's moustache.

Without troubling to examine the screen, I walked away. My thoughts dwelt on the fantastic story I'd just heard, which I wished very much to disbelieve; I did my best to do so, telling myself that it was incredible. That was the trouble, it was *too* incredible; too incredible to be an invention. And it tied up too neatly with Upjohn's conduct. Thinking, "What do I care? It's not my business," I started up the stairs with a determined tread. But my steps grew slower and more uncertain and presently stopped altogether.

I couldn't understand why I should feel worried and full of doubts, when by comparison with the dreary life I'd been living, my present position (in spite of what I'd thought in a mad moment) was sheer heaven. To reassure myself my thoughts turned as usual to my benefactor, whose letter I held in my hand. For several minutes I stood on the stairs, studying those few lines as though a message had been written between them in invisible ink, which my gaze could develop. But nothing else appeared there. With a sigh, I reflected that it was strange no mention had been made of my work . . . I would have expected at least an outline of my

duties. Why had I been told to consider myself a guest? And what was the meaning of the phrase about occupying myself as I thought fit? Was I supposed to start work on my own account? The note, at first sight so simple and friendly, now seemed to bristle with problems and uncertainties. Instead of removing my doubts it was adding to them, and I quickly folded the sheet of paper and returned it to its envelope. "I'd better ask Penny," was the only decision I came to, continuing up the stairs. Perhaps she would know what was expected of me.

Having left the secretary in the hall a minute ago, I was surprised to come face to face with her when I reached the top of the stairs, walking briskly towards me along the gallery, a briefcase under one arm. With the memory of the trick she had just played me fresh in my mind, I stood still, saying I wanted to ask her advice.

"Some other time," she replied, shaking her head. "I can't stop now:" adding that there would be plenty of time to talk later on. Without moving or speaking, I watched her approach; and when she was quite close to me, I suddenly stretched out both arms, blocking the gallery completely; determined I wouldn't let her pass till she'd told me what I wanted to know. She smiled at me, quite unperturbed; and then vanished again—an inconspicuous curtain must have concealed the door by which she eluded me this time.

Somehow, I was amused by the repetition of the trick which had irritated me before; indeed, a second edition of it struck me as so ludicrous that I couldn't help laughing out loud. Making no attempt to follow her or even to look behind the curtain, I called out, not quite

knowing why: "Am I to keep the same room that I slept in last night?"

"Why not?" Her voice came back faintly, muffled by the thick velvet folds as if on a long distance line, so that I wasn't sure of the last words which sounded like: "There's nothing wrong with it, is there?"

FIVE

My sudden cheerfulness went with me to the grand room, where everything had been put in order, shades lowered, fresh flowers placed here and there. I was struck by the amount of labour the servants must have put into years of work to attain the jewel-bright cleanliness which made each shining object glitter and all wood surfaces gleam with a rich patina. But all this brightness only seemed to emphasize the dark painting, by far the most important thing in the room, to which everything else was subordinated, and to which I was at once attracted.

As I stood in front of the picture, I was immediately caught up and out of myself, absorbed in its peculiar atmosphere. The face I had previously found there eluded me now; but suddenly I was convinced that I was about to make some other, perhaps more significant, discovery. A sense of anticipatory excitement invaded me, emanating from the dark oblong on the wall. It was as though, not only I myself, but everything in the room, in the garden outside, in the sky, even, were waiting attentively for the coming revelation. Before my eyes, the painted values were beginning to change; the deep, sombre colours receded and paled, the drawing grew more defined; and yet I still could not indentify the features.

There was no precise moment when the face became

clear to me. Perhaps the effect of abruptness with which it did so may have been caused by my surprise that it was not the face I was expecting to see. It seemed to me that one moment there was no face visible; that the next the Administrator's face was looking out, almost too plainly; every detail was exactly rendered, as if challenging me to doubt it. I quickly glanced over my shoulder and round the whole room to see whether anything could have happened there to account for the change that made me distrust my eyes. But in the sunlight, muted by awnings lowered outside the windows, everything was as before, showing the bright disarming reality of a brilliant morning. There was nothing to help me to understand why a reproduction of a stained-glass-window angel should have been transformed, while I was having my breakfast, into a portrait of the man for whom I had come to work.

But this was no ordinary portrait, I perceived, examining it more closely, struck by the translucent flesh tints, through which the spirit seemed to shine like a flame. Mysterious, magical, the picture at this point transferred me to the other world, to which it obviously belonged: and, for some reason, I was able to make the transition as naturally and easily as, if I'd fallen asleep, I should have begun to dream. I felt no surprise, watching the softly pulsing and winglike flames, which fluted around the head, encircling it with their living wreath. It was my own vision I saw there, man and angel in one shape, incorporeal angel-stuff shining out of the painted man. If only I could interpret its meaning correctly! But no sooner was my perception complete than it began to fade. The breathing wing-flames grew

smaller and fainter, their diminishing fluctuations put out by the deepening colours of the original painting . . . till there was the dark indefinite framed oblong, and nothing more.

This brief vision (if that's what it should be called) had, however, a strong and lasting effect, all the more remarkable because, immediately afterwards, I could hardly recall it, left only with an impression of mystery, in which the Administrator, the picture and myself were involved, as in some shared enchantment. Later, when full recollection returned and the spell had broken, I wondered how I could have been so credulous, my nature being inclined usually to a cynical scepticism. I could only suppose that, in the first flush of wonder at Eagles' Nest, in that strange atmosphere saturated with wonders, immeasurably remote from everyday life, it must have been easy to accept the reality of a metaphysical experience.

And, having accepted it, all my vague uneasiness vanished as if by magic, I was relieved of all responsibility. My feeling was that I'd put myself into the hands of my benefactor, who would take care of everything, leaving me free to relax luxuriously in an almost uncanny sense of wellbeing, gaiety even, as if I'd been reborn, without any selfconsciousness, as the happy, hopeful, handsome young man I had been in my early twenties.

It was no mere passing euphoria, either. For days I went on enjoying this unparalleled freedom from every care, which was enhanced still further by the certainty that to do so was perfectly right and proper. After the long period of misfortune and lonely depression I had

just lived through, I needed such a spell of authorized happiness to restore my self-confidence and banish the nightmare despair that had so nearly overwhelmed me. As I've said, it all seemed natural at first; only when some time had passed in this idyllic fashion did I begin to feel I was living a fairy tale, in which the portrait played an important though obscure part I made no attempt to investigate. There was no need to do so, since I trusted my patron absolutely, and he was in charge of the whole situation. Besides, I was unwilling to risk any interruption of the precious dreamlike contentment in which I was basking. And though, under the surface, my more rational self must have been dwelling upon the subject all the time, this only became clear when my entrancement ended.

As long as the trance was too profound for any disturbance of my inner tranquility by surface events, I accepted everything about Eagles' Nest with the same acquiescence; including the long elaborate meals I shared with Penny in fantastic grandeur. The first indication that my interior reservoir of calm was almost drained was the sudden impatience I felt one day at lunch time, watching the girl choose from a huge tray of small dishes, which required two white-uniformed peasants to hold it. All of a sudden then, I knew I could not go on enjoying this fabulous way of life any longer; the whole mealtime ceremony appeared ludicrous and boring. Suddenly irritated by Penny's careful choice, when my turn came, I helped myself so casually from the array of dishes that I hardly noticed what I put on my plate. It almost seemed as if I'd been deluding myself deliberately;

pretending to take pleasure in things I really found rather tiresome. "The fact is, I really don't appreciate luxury," I thought. "I suppose I've lived too long with the under-dogs."

It was now that my deeper preoccupation declared itself unexpectedly with the words: "Do you know that portrait in my room?" which came out of my mouth as if of their own accord.

Since I myself was surprised to hear my voice asking about the picture, which had no connexion with the dining-room or with our conversation, it was quite natural for Penny to look surprised by the question. There was no basis for my suspicion that she knew quite well which picture I meant, though she only replied, "The house is full of portraits," as if to deprive this particular one of any special significance.

Rather a long silence followed, in which the topic seemed to have been dropped. But all of a sudden I felt compelled to revive it, saying, "The picture I mean is a portrait of the A . . . at least, I think so." the doubtful words sounded absurd, I couldn't blame the girl for laughing; but still I plodded on: "I thought at first it was a reproduction—it's annoying not to be sure, that's why I asked you . . ." I was rather puzzled by my own persistence; and by the proposal I wanted to make that she should come and look at the picture and tell me how it struck her.

Somehow I must have conveyed my sudden eagerness to see it through her eyes, for she said, "If I saw it I might be able to tell you. I'd come and have a look at it—if we were anywhere else." The servants happened to be out of the room, fetching the next course, and,

seeing that I had not understood her, she explained primly, though with a somewhat arch expression I hadn't seen before: "People here are very straight-laced. It would create a fearful scandal if I were seen going to your room."

I laughed, trying without much success to turn the whole thing into a joke, though, in reality, I was horrified by my indiscretion. Invisible pitfalls seemed to be opening all around me. I had spoken in perfect innocence: yet I saw how my words could be twisted, my interest in the picture distorted, to look like a method of enticing the secretary to my room, and used as further evidence of my depravity. I didn't actually suspect the girl herself of wanting to harm me; to be fair, I couldn't believe it. On the other hand, I was by no means certain of her; and anyone placed as I was could not afford to take risks. I would have to be much more careful in future.

Hoping to obliterate the memory of what I'd been saying by introducing a new topic at once, I plunged without premeditation into the subject of my work, which suddenly seemed urgent, though, throughout the days of my dreamlike idleness, I hadn't given it a thought. "Is there any reason," I asked, "why I shouldn't start my work in the library this afternoon?"

Penny's face assumed the blank childish wide-eyed expression that always struck me as false and affected, matching the exaggerated innocence of the tone in which she said, "Why in the library? What work do you mean?" raising her eyebrows in a way that surely was not natural.

"That's why I've come here—to work in the library—

isn't it? I'll have to start some time, so why not today?" Although I did my best to speak carelessly and cheerfully, I thought my own voice sounded like a bad actor's, as if her affectation had infected me.

She didn't answer at once: and I watched her expression change to one I found incomprehensible at this moment, because it seemed out of context, unsuited to what we were saying. Not at all an unfriendly look, it appeared to express sympathy, rather than anything else. And, as there was no reason for her to look sympathetic, I felt slightly disturbed; it was a relief when she replied to my last question merely, "Why ask me?"

"Why, indeed?" I thought, assuming she meant I ought to be more independent; and said aloud, "I just thought the A. might have left some instructions with you about what he wanted me to do. But it doesn't matter. I'll find ways of making myself useful once I get into the library. Where is it, by the way? I don't seem to have found it yet."

"You never would find it on your own."

By contrast with my not very genuine airiness, Penny's voice now sounded uncompromisingly forthright. Again I felt some misgiving, unable to banish the idea that these superficially harmless exchanges concealed something ominous.

"Why not?" I asked, staring at her, trying to read her thoughts.

But she only said shortly, "Don't let's discuss it; it's a waste of time." Since we happened to be alone at that moment, I could again ask, "Why?" And, without the servants' restraining presence, she let her feelings escape by exclaiming, "Oh, do be quiet! What's the use of

going on about it? The door's locked, anyhow, and I keep the key."

"Then you'll just have to hand it over to me," I retorted, trying to substitute indignation for my growing uneasiness. "You've got no right to keep me out of the room where I'm supposed to be working." But I couldn't keep up the pretence of resentment, my nameless apprehension came much closer, when I heard her next words.

"I've got no right to let you in there." She sounded unhappy and anxious now, and I could detect neither impatience nor affectation in her tone. Her usually direct gaze faltered, she looked down at her plate. I had a strong impression that I need ask only one more question to uncover a dangerous secret. But I didn't ask it; I had no desire to become involved with secrets and danger; all I wanted was to go on feeling my peaceful content, which, I admit, wasn't exactly courageous.

Rather ashamed of such moral cowardice, I returned to the subject, while we were alone drinking our coffee on the terrace. But now I could get nothing out of Penny; all my efforts to persuade her to let me into the library were in vain. Nothing I said made the slightest difference; she remained adamant, repeating obstinately that she'd received no orders relating to me as librarian—not once had I even been mentioned in that capacity. It proved nothing that a letter had once been written to me in answer to my application for the post—a letter, by the way, which I couldn't produce. How could she be sure, to begin with, that I was the person I said I was?

This seemed so preposterous that I burst out laughing, forgetting my unformulated alarm, amused, in spite of her annoying obstructiveness, by the desperate picture

she seemed to have formed of me. "Do you really think I might have murdered some poor chap on the chance of getting his job?" I asked, smiling, and feeling more friendly towards her than usual.

Instead of answering, she lowered her head and seemed to be studying the small flowering plants that grew in the crannies between the paving-stones, her face hidden. I looked down on her smooth, bowed, dark head, neatly divided by the parting as by a straight path, from which the individual hairs sprang vigorous as young saplings. Not withstanding its meekness, her pose suggested nothing but immutable stubbornness, and I thought, what indeed was the use of talking to her? "I don't believe you're even listening." I said, half laughing and half exasperated. "One might as well talk to a tree."

But the girl was less impervious than I supposed. Apparently, she had been suppressing some strong feeling, and had now reached the limit of her endurance, for, to my surprise, she exclaimed suddenly: "What's gone wrong with you? Why must you spoil everything? Why can't you be the same as you were yesterday and the days before that?"

I was too taken aback to reply. Was it so obvious that a more realistic frame of mind was beginning to invade my dream-state? In any case, why should she choose this particular moment to comment on the fact, which had nothing whatever to do with my work? Her face was still turned away from me, and now she had covered it with her hands—perhaps I hadn't heard her correctly. But there could be no doubt about her next words.

"I've been so lonely," she said pathetically. "You can't think what a difference it made when you came—no one

else has ever talked to me before, or been friendly, since I came here."

There was real pathos in the way she spoke. And also there was the sound of some personal feeling which moved me; which I hadn't heard in any voice for so long that I had come to believe I would never hear it again. It made no difference that the voice belonged to a peasant girl whose standard of life was quite different from my own; a girl I didn't entirely trust, who wasn't outstandingly attractive to me, towards whom I felt, at most, a tolerant friendliness. Penny, as an individual, hardly mattered to me; I was only moved by her feeling for me.

Rather ashamed of the egotistical nature of my reaction, of which I was quite aware, I now gave in to her with, I hoped, a good grace.

"Don't worry," I said, "I won't pester you any more." I leaned forward to pat her shoulder automatically, concentrated on my thoughts, some of which found their way into the words, "Though for the life of me I can't see why you won't let me into the library—unless you keep the family skeletons there." I hardly knew I had spoken loud enough for her to hear, and certainly didn't expect anything to come of my mutterings. It was a complete surprise when she suddenly jumped up, saying she would get the key and take me to the library there and then, just to prove that there weren't any sinister secrets . . .

I supposed she must think she was doing her duty by keeping me out; but I was preoccupied, on the way, noticing with displeasure how much more tolerant my attitude had become in consequence of what she had

said. I followed her along passages, up and down steps, around corners, to what seemed like a separate wing of the building. It was true, I would never have found it alone; even now that I had been shown the way, I wasn't sure I could find it again by myself.

Walking silently ahead, the girl insisted on elaborate precautions against being heard or seen; deliberately dramatizing the expedition, it seemed to me. But when at length we stopped in a dim little lobby, where she produced a bunch of keys and started trying them one after another in the lock of the door ahead, I was startled by the anxious look on her face. Even though I told myself her pallor was due to the greenish light entering through a window half covered by leaves, I still felt uneasy. It was impossible not to be aware of the apprehensiveness her whole being expressed, which almost persuaded me she really was breaking some rule of the house by bringing me here, and was terrified of the consequences. "I ought not to have let her do it," I thought. I knew so little of Eagles' Nest and the mysterious system which governed its occupants. Perhaps I ought to suggest going back to the other part of the house; I was actually on the point of doing so, when she finally found the right key and opened the door, and I abruptly forgot my consideration.

I'd promised to be satisfied by looking into the room from outside. But now I was seized by uncontrollable curiosity; before Penny had time to realize what I was doing, I'd slipped past her and through the door; only to find the library practically in darkness, all the blinds drawn. The only object to catch my eye was a pallid globe against the book-lined shelves, gravely inclined

like a studious giant's bald head, as I hurried towards the window—unless some light were let in, I might just as well have remained outside. My hand reached up to a dangling cord, but it never got there. All I heard was a slithering rush behind me, and then Penny flung herself at me, snatching my hand away from the blind, and hissing into my ear, "Do you want to get us both sacked?"

Strong and painful as thongs, her fingers dug into my wrist as she tugged me in the direction of the door. Out of sheer amazement rather than with any idea of resisting, I didn't move at once; whereupon she started throwing her whole weight against me again and again, turning her body into a sort of battering-ram, gasping furiously at the same time, "I suppose you're trying to let everyone know we're in here——"

Now I simply gave in, and allowed myself to be hustled through the door, which she instantly shut and locked. I said nothing to her, incapable of thinking rationally, when all my ideas were confused by the extraordinary sensation of her young compact body hurled against mine, exhaling a faint odour of sweat and clover, like that of a healthy country girl who has worked in the fields. And she, taking advantage of my confusion, insisted on leaving at once, permitting me only the briefest glimpse of the librarian's quarters; snug little rooms, where everything for a self-contained life was stored away neatly, as on board a ship. The whole way back, I remained silent, preoccupied, regretting the impulse that had made me break my word, for I realized that I would have found out more by being docile and obedient. Too late, I saw that my action had

merely scared the girl into one of her moods of mulish obstructiveness. Nothing could be done with her at present, and I merely resolved to return to the library as soon as possible.

SIX

My total lack of funds presented a problem that grew more urgent each day. The Administrator's generosity in extending to me the credit of the house as far as the shops were concerned, did not cover all contingencies; the tipping question, for instance, was heavily on my mind. It seemed to me that the butler already expected a present; and he was the sort of man who would turn nasty if he didn't get what he considered to be his due.

I was pondering over the matter alone in my room, and opened one of the big closets in the vague hope of finding some saleable object among my possessions. But nothing confronted me except the bare shelves, and, in the middle of them, my paintbox, scrubbed and polished almost out of recognition, looking lonely, unused, out of place; its position, I thought, was much the same as my own. We were both in the same boat. Like a corollary, came the thought, "Why not renew the old partnership?"

The rest followed in automatic sequence. My actions seemed to perform themselves in an effortless progression, as if predestined, without the help of my brain. I noticed when I was leaving the room, the box slung over my shoulder, that I instinctively avoided looking at the picture. And, out in the garden, I tried to keep away from the peasants, whose inquisitive eyes made me uncomfortable. There were always a great many of these

dark workers about the place, and today there seemed hundreds of them. Wherever I turned, dark eyes peered at me between branches and leaves, high up in the trees, or flat on the earth, following me everywhere. I fancied my paintbox was the special target of their curiosity, and realized that I felt guilty about what I was going to do, as if I were contemplating a crime. Impatiently, I told myself not to be such a fool: what could possibly be more harmless than making a sketch in the grounds? Even though I intended to sell it, nobody could object, provided I included nothing that identified Eagles' Nest unmistakably.

To my relief, I found that the further I went from the house, the fewer peasants there seemed to be, until, in the outer areas of cultivation, beyond the gardens, only a few scattered gangs were at work, and could easily be avoided. Now, my spirits rising, I began to feel pleased with my plan, and to enjoy walking through these more natural-seeming plantations, looking for a suitable subject, quite exhilarated by the prospect of a definite occupation. In retrospect, yesterday's aimless lounging seemed a terrible bore; I could not think how I'd been satisfied just to sit about doing nothing for hours on end.

The ground sloped upwards all the time, but so gradually that I had no sense of arriving at any special eminence, quite unprepared, on emerging from the thick glossy foliage of a lemon grove, to find only a windbreak of eucalyptus trees between me and a precipice falling sheer into empty space. When I looked beyond the pale trunks with their peeling bark, I couldn't help giving an exclamation of astonishment, seeing the seven judge-

shaped crags, standing right overhead in the changeless blue sky; an apparition so close, so dramatic, and so unexpected, that it made the whole scene seem unreal. I stood gazing up at the mountains, till I got used to their nearness, and my eyes started to ache from the brilliance flooding down on them from above. There was something wearisome about that deep dazzling blue—did clouds never form in this part of the world? I hadn't seen one ever since I arrived.

Walking on, following the edge of the bluff, I soon reached a point where the fall was less steep, and the borders of luxuriant green met the desolate rock-frontier in sensational contrast. At once deciding this was the place, I slipped the strap of the paintbox off my shoulder and prepared to start work. I knew that, from the selling angle, I ought to have chosen a scene more obviously attractive. But I couldn't resist the spectacular juxtaposition of lovely lavish productiveness in the foreground and the wilderness alongside, breeding only its fantasia of dead stone.

The afternoon passed for me in a timeless and private dream. When I finished my sketch, just as the changing light would have forced me to stop anyhow, I was surprised by the speed with which the hours had slipped past. A little tired, a little bemused, I walked slowly back to the house in the sunset glow, resolved in future to spend part of each day like this—I'd forgotten how much pleasure one could get from painting, as long as it wasn't done under pressure of acute financial need, involving one's very existence.

In my mind's eye, a picture formed of the days to come; when I would be installed in the librarian's cosy

rooms, safe, secure, self-contained, in quiet seclusion and peace, living and working enclosed in this same sort of happy dream. I asked no more of life now; the ambitions of my earlier days had evaporated during the disastrous period that was just over; now all I wanted was peace; peace and security.

Lost in a kind of vague daydream, I wandered placidly through the garden, from which the peasants had gone now, in the warm still air, fragrant with flower-sweetness, and bright with the flamingo-flush overhead. All around me lay this enchanted beauty, this prodigality of fruits and garlands, appropriate to my mood; strange magnificent trees forming a background for incredibly brilliant flowers, shaped like bells, like trumpets or butterflies, translucent as glass, or like exploding fireworks, in the slanting low sunbeams. Everywhere the springing water rose and fell, plaiting its rippling patterns, revolving in sparkling wheels, filling the air with glittering rainbows and mysterious whispered music. Here one might expect to see nymphs and naiads playing together, as in some flowery paradise.

Then, with startling suddenness, all this bright beauty vanished, the wonder-light abruptly extinguished by the forbidding fortresslike bulk of Eagles' Nest, jutting darkly into the sky, and looming above me in all its sinister grimness, like a part of the gruesome lifeless mass of the mountains behind. I felt its cold shadow upon me, heavily cold, like a weight. The sun had vanished behind it, I was left in its profound shadow, which I really felt like an oppressive weight, crushing me down. I couldn't bear to go inside the sombre great place, recognizing this crushing sensation as some restraint it

had re-imposed, which for a few hours had been lifted from me. Though the air was still very warm, I found, as I forced myself to enter, that I was shivering.

I was rather shocked by these feelings, which, though they only concerned the house itself, couldn't be entirely dissociated from its master, to whom they made me feel a traitor. I tried to think of other things; but, going along the corridors to my room, I was uncomfortably aware of all the doors I was passing, and of all the deserted splendid rooms beyond, their untouched perfection repolished endlessly by a labouring brown-skinned army, kept uselessly immaculate, filled daily with fresh flowers nobody ever saw—Why? I asked aloud in the silence; which closed down so heavily and with such finality upon this small interruption, that the expression "dead silence" came into my head, seeming appropriate as never before.

Reaching my room, I hurriedly shut myself in, glad to be on my own ground, in the one corner of the huge building which had been obliged, partially at least, to accept me. Usually I felt at ease here, but now something still seemed to oppress me; and, for the second time, I had the impression that something was different—had been changed during my absence. But what? It happened to be in front of the glass: and the mirror answered me at once by showing my face looking out like a portrait from a frame; thus drawing my attention to the picture on the wall: which I began to study, honestly though unwillingly, standing a pace or two away from it, and regarding it squarely.

It was apparently the same as it had always been; the colours as darkly gemlike, the face as unclear. Yet I

knew at the first glance that whatever had given it a mystic significance for me was now missing; though the network of shadows seemed to be gliding apart, it was only to show that some nameless marvel had been and gone, and would not come again. I did not know what I had lost, but only that the loss had left me vulnerable and depleted. I had no clear understanding at the time of why I suddenly felt depressed; I seemed not to realize that my magic contentment had gone, and that I kept reminding myself of the pleasure I had derived from painting because this resource at least was my own, and one of which I wasn't liable to be abruptly bereft.

How far away the earlier part of the day seemed now—as remote as my lost inward serenity. When I sat down to dinner with Penny, I'd almost forgotten about our trip to the library, and wondered irritably why she was looking so glum. At the same time, I dimly recognized in my own total lack of sympathy for her, a sign that I had returned to the cynical pessimism I regarded as my normal self-centred state. Not only her long face, but everything I could see, got on my nerves; I was in the mood to find fault with everybody and everything round me, as though my former acceptance had been replaced by a general distaste for all that concerned Eagles' Nest—a feeling to which I gave immediate expression by saying, "Couldn't our meals be a bit simpler?"

Now there appeared on Penny's face the look of startled disapproval I was beginning to know would be her reaction to any proposed change. Why? she wanted to know; didn't I like the food?

"Yes, yes," I answered impatiently. "But there's far too much of it—it's all far too elaborate. Why must we

be so formal when the two of us are alone?"

"I've no authority to make alterations," she quickly and firmly replied, with a nervous glance at the butler, who, of course, gave no indication of having heard.

I said no more, listening, while the meal went on in rather uneasy silence, to the curious slithering shuffle of the peasants' soft shoes, an uncertain subservient background, on which the steps of the butler and footmen tapped out their strong authoritarian rhythm of dominance.

A certain humorous liveliness in Penny's talk made her, as a rule, an amusing companion: but now she sat there evidently downcast and worried, without speaking a word, fiddling with the implements on the table. By this time, I'd recalled our expedition to the library, and could only conclude she was still worrying about that, though I found it hard to believe she took so seriously an incident I considered trivial. Not choosing to remember details of a personal nature, I thought of the affair only in connexion with the extraordinary system governing Eagles' Nest: which I imagined as something huge, nebulous and vaguely python-like, enveloping the place in its folds, crushing out all happiness and spontaneous life. It was only because I had escaped, temporarily, from its constriction, that I had been able to enjoy painting.

"I hear you spent the afternoon sketching."

With her odd knack of seeming to follow my thoughts, the girl interrupted them here. She was probably only trying to make conversation. But she couldn't have hit on a more unfortunate topic, or a worse manner of introducing it: I found myself looking at her with the

persistent, though apparently baseless, suspicion that, from the very first, had haunted my feeling for her.

Resentment had all at once overwhelmed me: against her; against the peasants who so promptly informed her of what I was doing; against the whole iniquitous system that set members of a household to spy upon one another. It wasn't that I had any objection to people knowing about my sketch; I assured myself that my conduct was perfectly open and above-board. Yet, at the back of my mind, lurked an uneasy notion that my indignation was too violent to be altogether impersonal. It was this misgiving that made me stare across the table so angrily, exclaiming, "I suppose that's against the rules too!"

The secretary's dark eyes, looking straight into mine, seemed to grow rounder and larger, until it was like looking into the mouths of a pair of pistols. She seemed really scared, and for a moment I felt ashamed—why was I being so nasty to her? But, by blaming myself and putting myself in the wrong, I merely revived the almost forgotten grievance I'd felt at first over her supposedly superior position in the house, and now burst out uncontrollably, "What's going on here, anyway? Why is there all this spying and secrecy? Why should everything be forbidden? Why are you afraid to open a window?"

By almost shouting these questions at her, I got rid of my bad temper at once. And then, seeing her drooping there, her face hidden, I again felt uncomfortable, as I did when the brown servants assumed their attitudes of exaggerated humility. I wished she would answer back, instead of sitting meekly silent. What could be going on

in her mind? Suddenly I got an impression of having awkwardly blundered into something mysterious about which I knew nothing and said apologetically, "I'm sorry . . . I shouldn't have spoken like that . . . I didn't mean anything personal."

Still she didn't say a word. She was sitting now in a queer huddled position, her elbows on the table and her face in her hands, which somehow made her look boneless, collapsed, like a puppet when the manipulator lets go of the strings. And now, my thoughts glancing aside at the odd theatrical suggestion inseparable from all that went on here, I saw the situation quite differently: for an instant, I could almost believe I'd imagined it all; that the grand room, the elaborately arranged table, the servants, Penny herself, had no existence outside my skull.

I don't know whether this wholesale derealization was the cause of my physical sensations, or vice versa; anyhow, my head was starting to spin, I could no longer see distinctly, but only through a blur. Perhaps, while I was out sketching, I'd got a touch of the sun: for now something seemed to be coming into the room like fog, impalpable, invisible, yet strangely real and oppressive. A sensation as of a rope tightening round me made me press my hands to my chest, to my throat . . . I couldn't breathe . . . I was choking, suffocating . . . At all costs, I must get out of the room . . .

I jumped up, everything swinging round me. It must have been my chair, skidding over the polished floor, that was responsible for the thin insane screeching filling my ears. I wanted to ask Penny to excuse me; but only indistinct bubbling sounds came out of my mouth; I

could no longer see her. And now I ceased to bother about good manners or anything but my one all-absorbing need to get through 'the door, towards which I was stumbling, vaguely aware of white phantom-shapes, melting out of the way before me as I advanced.

The moment I was alone, in another room, the python-coils let me go, and the world became normal again. I felt rather a fool for having made such an exhibition of myself; what in heaven's name could have been the matter? I told myself that it must have been the sun; next time I went out sketching, I'd wear a hat.

Unwilling to face Penny again that night, I shut myself in my room; though without eluding her, for she haunted my dreams all night long. From these uneasy dreams I kept waking up, filled with remorse, thinking of her as a frightened girl whose fears I'd increased by my selfish insistence on going to the library, and to whom it was my duty to make amends.

In the morning I decided to have a talk with her, to find out what exactly she was afraid of, and do my best to help. I went down to breakfast with my plan prepared: directly afterwards, while it was still fairly cool, I'd get her to come for a walk with me, outside the gardens, where we could talk without any danger of eavesdroppers.

But she was not at the breakfast table, only appearing when I was ready to leave it. And then I didn't speak the words that formed the first part of my plan. I did not carry out any part of the plan at all, for she was at her most assured, most matter-of-fact; to speak to this composed young woman as if she were a frightened girl seemed absurd, and even insulting.

In any case, she herself took the initiative by speaking first; casually asking if I'd got over my indisposition, and then going on to say she had just been arranging for a car to go into the town shortly—would I like to go too? It would make a change for me, and, if I wished I could do some shopping.

Without hesitation, I replied, "Yes, I'd like to go very much." There was no urgency about talking to her; I could do that any time; whereas the chance of selling my sketch was unique, far too good to miss. Indeed, such a stroke of luck seemed almost too good to be true, considering how unlucky I usually was.

I sat with Penny for a few more minutes, giving some attention to her general remarks about the town and what was to be seen there. But the main part of my mind was far from her, thinking how to construct a mount for the painting, which was still wet, so that it could be put into a large envelope or a sheet of paper, and would merely look like something I was taking to post.

SEVEN

As if I'd already used up such planning abilities as I possessed, I didn't think much in advance about selling my sketch. Sitting in silence beside the peasant-chauffeur who drove me into the town, I merely decided to look for a suitable shop, and to let the impulse of the moment inspire the words in which I would tell the proprietor about my painting, and ask him to display this sketch for sale on commission.

To my surprise, my unaccustomed run of good luck continued; on leaving the car in the main street, I came almost immediately to a shop selling artists' materials and stationery, which looked just right for my purpose. But then, on the point of going inside, I altered my mind, in one of those second thoughts which, retrospectively, always appear as obvious mistakes, and decided, as there was plenty of time, to look round first, on the chance of finding somewhere even better.

I'd only taken a few steps, when I heard a girl's voice call my name; the street became indistinct as I listened.

"Hullo! how are you? I've been wondering why we never met—I was beginning to think you must have gone on somewhere else——" The incidents, the whole atmosphere of the long journey, came to life in my mind; for a second I could almost smell the hot stuffy train. But that memory was already left far behind, as I clasped the speaker's hand with real pleasure.

"Miss Hairdressing! I'm so glad to see you . . . this is really splendid . . ." Strange to say, the words were the literal truth. But the strangeness too was left behind in an instant, my pleasure seemed the most natural thing in the world as I gazed admiringly at the girl, who had blossomed out in an amazing way since our last meeting.

It was as though she had taken off a doll's mask, to reveal, under the commonplace prettiness, a personality both individual and charming. "There's no need to ask how you are," I told her. "You look simply wonderful . . . on top of the world . . ." I could hardly take my eyes off her graceful figure and attractive face, and it pleased me very much to see that she didn't seem to mind this. I could feel quite at ease with her, thinking that she had called to me; after all, she could so easily have avoided me, merely by keeping quiet—instead, she'd actually run after me for a few steps, I now remembered, with growing elation. She seemed to accept my companionship as a matter of course, for now, matching my step with hers, telling her today was my lucky day, I was walking along the street at her side, as though we had met by appointment.

A pleasant excitement was mounting in me, an almost forgotten sensation belonging to my youth—the thrill of an unexpected holiday, full of surprises and possibilities of adventure. The company of this delightful girl crowned the moment and made it perfect. A burden I hadn't even known I was carrying seemed to have dropped from me, and without it I walked as buoyantly as if the hard pavement were springy turf. I realized that the feeling of tranquil happiness I associated with

the picture had not come back; that there was a great difference between the serenity I had lost and the stimulation of the senses coming to me from my present companion. We happened to pass a shop window containing a huge mirror, in which I watched her advancing as though to meet me—but who was the young man beside her, bare-headed, approaching with the same easy youthful movements, the same blowing hair, the same happy smile? It gave me a real shock to recognize the reflexion as mine: I could hardly believe my eyes, seeing the young man I had been before catastrophe overwhelmed me once more walking the face of the earth. I thought he had left for ever. Then, filled with gratitude to the girl whose innocent magic had presented me with my lost youth, I accepted it in the same spirit of innocence, as a child takes the sweet or toy offered by a playmate, without asking questions or wondering where it comes from.

She fascinated me completely, I was charmed, almost infatuated; everything about her added to my delight: her grace and vigour, her gay friendliness, the way her skirt rippled against my leg, blown out in fan-shaped folds by the wind. The day seemed to expand before us in widening vistas of joy. I loved its bright colours and the strength of the sun. I loved the street scene, which was at the same time busy and unhurried, uncrowded. The noises of the traffic, the steps and voices of passers-by, were stimulating to me after the silent seclusion in which I'd been living. And it was all thanks to this girl, who had rescued me from desolation and lifeless splendour; from those deserted gardens, where only the fountains whirled and whispered like crazy ghosts. Too

excited to think clearly, I took her arm, prompted by the instinct that urges one to grasp the more desperately at a precious thing one is soon to lose; all I wanted on earth was to hold fast to her, and, through her, to youth and life, happiness.

I hardly heard what she was telling me, drinking in thirstily, like a man who has been lost in a waterless desert, this wonderful pulsing sensuous life she had made available, of which I had been deprived for so long. It almost seemed that I was within reach of the simple, forbidden secret of human contact, for which I had felt such a terrible craving on Christmas Eve, fearing I'd never again be allowed to share it. If only I could share it with this girl who was smiling up at me with such warm shining eyes! As strongly as I'd wanted to rush out into the street on that other occasion, I now wanted to throw my arms round her and kiss her—although this didn't strike me as exaggerated, but more like a kind of extension of the general happiness in the air, I felt it was time to control myself, and made an effort to listen to her.

"Wasn't it luck, my getting this job at the hotel beauty shop?" she was saying. "The manager's been wonderfully kind; he's even given me and mother a suite of our very own. And I love the work. It's so much easier here, it's hardly like work at all. We never have to do any cleaning or carrying—the peasants do all that; they practically wait on us. The hours are much shorter, too. And we have all the latest gadgets they don't know about at home; besides things they'd never think of, like fashion parades to amuse the customers while they're under the driers. That's how I got this dress.

One of my ladies gave it to me—wasn't it generous of her? It's a real model, you know. She got me to put it on while her bleach was taking. But then she said it looked so perfect on me it would be a shame for anyone else to wear it—what do you think?"

"I think you look perfectly lovely," I said, thinking, not of the dress, but of the graceful young body which had stirred my blood in this unaccustomed fashion, and which I was longing, much more intensely now, to embrace.

We had been walking gradually slower and slower, until we came to a standstill at the foot of a clocktower, where some trees shaded the tables of an open air café. There was a slight pause, during which, with a jolt of uneasiness, I seemed to hear the echo of my own words: they sounded wrong; too serious; too intense. They struck a wrong note, falsifying the whole situation. I fancied the girl was looking at me in surprise, and, hastily producing a smile, I said in an ordinary conversational tone, "You seem to have settled down here very quickly, after all. Do you remember our talk in the train?"

"What a little fool I was to be frightened of leaving home."

To my relief, I saw her smiling—perhaps she hadn't really noticed anything odd about my behaviour. While she went on chattering, I let my thoughts wander away to the tables under the trees, most of which were deserted at this early hour. But there was no reason why I shouldn't ask her to sit down with me for a drink or an ice cream even though it wasn't yet lunch time. And then, if I could manage somehow to spin it out . . .

"I never want to go home again—never!" she declared emphatically; just as I remembered that I couldn't invite her to have a meal or anything else with me, for the simple but very adequate reason that I was penniless. I didn't realize at the time why my sudden depression seemed to be as much the result of her last words as of my humiliating, exasperating, frustrating lack of money. My spell of good luck was over, that was painfully evident. The clock overhead began striking; somehow I'd known all along that the four blue faces up there were the enemies of my happiness; and now the strokes fell through the air with the cold accuracy of stones, shattering that fragile edifice most completely.

As promptly as if this were her cue, the girl exclaimed, "Oh, dear! That means I must fly. I promised to help the manager choose the material for our new overalls, and I musn't keep him waiting." She withdrew her arm as she spoke. But, with a quick movement, I caught hold of her hand and held on to it tightly, moved by an emotion I couldn't control, in which the manager seemed to be somehow involved—the thought of this unknown manager disquieted me, for some reason.

"Don't go yet!" I implored her. "Or, if you must, let me come to the shop with you—don't send me away . . ." All the joy of the last few minutes had vanished like a radiant dream, from which one wakes up with a sharp disappointment. I hardly knew what I was saying, overcome by my desire to detain her, as though the world would come to an end when she went away.

"But this is the shop—I'm not going any further. He's probably waiting inside."

Now there could be no doubt that my oddness and

agitation had been noted, and had had their effect. I thought she seemed nervous as well as surprised; I could feel her drawing as far away from me as she could while I was still holding on to her hand. Suddenly her fingers had gone stiff and resistant. I knew it was useless to prolong the situation; the longer it lasted the more awkward it was bound to become. But, though I ordered myself to let go, my muscles would not obey me; I still clung to her hand as to my last link with the living world.

Afraid of what might be seen in my face, I turned it towards the shop she had indicated, where a blurred meaningless cascade of colours confronted me. "Well then, I suppose it must be goodbye," I said, in what sounded like a ghastly parody of my natural voice. "It's been marvellous seeing you . . . talking to you . . ."

Either she took pity on my distress, or else she regarded it as a tribute to her feminine vanity, for she relaxed, saying, with an engaging air of childish regret, "But I've done all the talking—why didn't you stop me? You must tell me all your news next time. We're certain to meet again before long . . . Won't you tell me your address?"

I had the slightly fantastic idea that her last question, like a slow but dangerous missile, had been on its way towards me for some time; while I, muddle-headed and preoccupied, had waited too long to get out of its path—now it was too late; it had hit its target: myself. I couldn't refuse to answer, any more than I could continue to hold her hand, which now jerked impatiently in my own. At the same moment, a passer-by bumped into us, as if to demonstrate that we were causing an

obstruction by standing together there. My position all at once had become untenable.

"I'm staying outside the town," I muttered, hoping she'd be content with this vague reply. But she insisted on being told the name of the place, forcing me to say, "Eagles' Nest"—if only it meant nothing to her!

But, as she repeated, "Eagles' Nest," looking at me rather strangely, with a dawning constraint, I knew that the mere mention of the great house had produced its stultifying effect; that its dark shadow stretched all the way to where we were standing. It didn't surprise me to hear her say, "Then you're much too grand to be standing in the street, talking to the hotel hairdresser!" She laughed as she said it; but, because she was a little embarrassed, her laughter, for the first time, didn't ring true. Again she gave me a curious look; then, drawing away, waving her hand airily, she twisted round rapidly towards the shop and was gone.

I could only think, "It's all over . . ." Everything had ended so quickly . . . so quickly . . . As if I'd been in a lift going down too fast, the sudden fall of my mood made me almost dizzy; for a moment, a stupefied sense of loss dominated all other feeling. Then, recovering slightly, I moved towards the shop, as if to pursue the girl, whose magic had made it possible for me to play the out-dated part of a young man. But, after taking a few steps, I turned, and walked in the other direction, remembering that she would not be alone. I definitely did not want to meet the manager. Yet I knew this wasn't the whole reason why I refrained from following her.

Without her rejuvenating presence, the rôle I had

been playing was already starting to lose its attraction; I no longer seemed to have any aptitude for, or real interest in it. An uneasy suspicion that it had betrayed me into some undefined foolishness made me want to forget the whole thing. But I couldn't easily forget my reflexion as I'd seen it in the shop window, and as it appeared now before my mind's eye, while I strolled on, not thinking of where I was going. My thoughts still circled round it, as they might have done round an old portrait, with an interest now purely objective. Although the momentary impression of recognition had been so vivid, I no longer identified myself with that not-unattractive young man, whose face I had seen, under the thick hair, blowing in the wind. Had I ever really looked like that? I could hardly believe it; my young self seemed no more than a part of the radiant dream that had so entirely vanished.

"You really *have* dropped something, this time!"

The flower seller's unexpected voice made me jump. I stopped dead, startled by her keen gaze—what was she doing here, giving me shocks in the main street, instead of sitting under her umbrella outside the station? She was dressed more fashionably than our previous meeting. I observed, just beginning to collect my scattered wits; when she gave me a second and far more severe shock, by offering me the envelope containing my sketch—how *could* I have dropped it without noticing?

"You are absent-minded, aren't you? You need a wife to look after you."

Though I heard this, I paid no attention, for the clock was striking again, recalling the sadness that had suddenly fallen on me just before it struck last; which

had been due, I now realized, to an unconscious comparison of my own progress here with that of the hair-dressing girl, who, inexperienced and almost a child, had already established herself; while I was no further forward than on the day we both arrived.

The clock had another disturbing message for me, of more practical importance. I would barely have time to transact my business in the art shop before the car started back to Eagles' Nest. This made me pull myself together and forget everything else. As in an instantaneous vision, I saw how I was one moment absent, dreamy, inattentive; the next full of energy, practical and alert.

The flower seller showed no disposition to leave after handing over my property; but I was absolutely determined she shouldn't delay me, and, thanking her hurriedly but profusely, looked at my watch, saying, as I did so, "You must forgive me for rushing off . . . I'd no idea it was so late . . ." I believe I added something about an appointment, before I strode off. But the leisurely walking habits of those who live in warm climates prevented me from getting very far ahead. The pavement narrowed, becoming crowded with stationary loungers, as well as with people strolling along three or four abreast. Glancing back, I saw the woman I was trying to avoid still close behind me. And, the next time I had to wait for the traffic, she caught up, crossed the street when I did, and, repeating my behaviour with the hairdresser, placed herself at my side, her long stride easily keeping pace with mine.

"Why are you always in such a hurry?" she asked conversationally; continuing, in a different tone, as I

didn't speak: "Oh, I know you're angry . . . you think its brazen impudence on my part, following you like this. But there's a good reason for it. You may even be grateful one of these days."

She was just trying to make me curious, I decided, and maintained an obstinate silence. But, though I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of asking a question, I couldn't help being aware of her opulent figure beside me, and of her handsome face, animated by eyes by no means unintelligent, and thinking that, in other circumstances, I wouldn't have objected to her company; it was only at this moment that she was an infernal nuisance.

We were approaching, I saw, the art shop which had been my starting point and was my present objective. What should I do now? If I went in, the flower seller would almost certainly come too—she had the audacity of a dozen women—I should have to talk to the proprietor and display my sketch with her looking on. "No, that's out of the question," I told myself, with such finality that I was remotely troubled by the new secretiveness I seemed to have developed over my personal affairs.

I forgot this side issue when my companion suddenly touched my arm, pointing out an island of dusty green in the middle of the street—the roadway branched to encircle it, uniting again beyond—and said, "I want to go into that garden, but I'm scared of the traffic—won't you see me across?"

Thinking I caught a glimpse of her white teeth flashing a smile, I looked at her rather grimly; but she insisted: "Surely you can't be so ungallant as to refuse."

Probably this would be the quickest way of getting rid of her, I decided, gripping her arm above the elbow, and hurrying her to the other side of the road. "For cool cheek, I certainly have to hand it to you," I said shortly, with reluctant admiration for her shameless technique. If I ran all the way, there would still be just time to go to the shop, I was thinking, as I stood like a diver on the edge of the kerb, ready to plunge into the first break in the traffic.

Cars continuing to pass in an unbroken stream, I found myself listening again to the flower seller's voice, which had now become coaxing and intimate, insinuating itself persistently into my ear. "Don't be cross with me for teasing . . . I had to get you over here somehow. I must speak to you privately, and I couldn't think of any other suitable place around here."

"Speak to me privately—what about?" It was understandable, I thought afterwards, that in my astonishment I should have let the question slip out. But I could find no excuse for the way I still waited there, and, instead of escaping while I had the chance, did nothing to stop her linking arms with me, so that I was firmly tethered to her.

"Let's go under the trees," her persuasive voice murmured enticingly. "It'll be cooler there and there won't be so much noise."

Weakly thinking, "I shouldn't be doing this," I let her lead me into the shade; it was almost as if she had hypnotized me. My thoughts were incoherent; I remember thinking irrelevantly, "What an extraordinary place to put a garden." And, indeed, it would have been hard to find a less attractive spot than this dusty patch of

tired-looking vegetation, surrounded on every side by the roaring traffic, filling the air with its fumes. It lacked even the privacy she had claimed for it: I noticed, with passing surprise, that it seemed to be a favourite haunt of urban lovers, to judge by the enlaced and oblivious couples sprawling on the benches and among the broken-down shrubs.

My eyes moved to an enormous truck thundering by, hanging over our heads at what looked a dangerous angle. I felt completely bewildered by the continuous roar, punctuated by frantically sounded horns, and the general sense of turmoil and confusion. It was rather like being on a small rock in mid-ocean, with waves constantly battering it. I expected to be overwhelmed every moment, or swept away by the noisy flood.

Taking advantage of the fact that I was distracted by this pandemonium, the woman suddenly leaned right across me, putting out her hand as though she meant to snatch my sketch; forgetting that she'd already had it in her possession and returned it to me, I instinctively jerked it away. In doing so, I somehow upset her balance, so that she sprawled on my chest, making me stagger under her weight, and almost stifling me with the strong perfume she used. From somewhere down near my breastbone, I heard her say, "I *must* talk to you about that picture of yours—it's terribly important": but, more concerned with getting rid of her, I only muttered, "You had no business to look at it."

I was absolutely determined to free myself. But she seemed equally resolved to stay where she was, for I couldn't dislodge her. Meanwhile, I noticed how one or two of the interlocked figures nearby had interrupted

their amorous play in order to stare at us. Seeing their smiles, I realized it must look as if I were trying to repel my companion's unwelcome advances, while she had me at her mercy; and, unwilling to provide these onlookers with any more entertainment, I kept quiet, in spite of my discomfort.

This the flower seller seemed to misinterpret, for she said, "You needn't worry because I've seen it. I don't gossip about what doesn't concern me. I wouldn't get anyone into trouble if I could help it—certainly not you. There's something I rather like about you, you know, although you're so stand-offish." At last she straightened up, enabling me to withdraw, much to my relief, though she still kept a grip on my arm. "But, for heavens' sake, don't let anyone else see it," she went on. "I'm only saying this for your good. You're a stranger—you don't understand our ways . . . which aren't always as simple as they appear."

Though I knew I ought to hurry away, her remarks made me inquisitive, and, in spite of myself, I felt more friendly towards her because she'd said she liked me; so I listened, while she said, "Don't take this the wrong way—I'm only trying to help. It's dangerous to get mixed up with things you don't understand—as I hear you're apt to do."

"Who told you that?" I interrupted, rather indig-nantly; but instead of answering, she said, "Never mind. Just remember you don't know very much about us. What's true where you come from may be false here. Perhaps our standards are different—anyhow, I dread to think what would have happened if the wrong person had got hold of your sketch."

"Oh, come, now!" I protested, smiling. "I can't swallow that. I may be an ignorant stranger, but you can't make me believe my harmless sketch could get me into trouble. You must be pulling my leg."

Without the trace of an answering smile, she replied: "I was never more serious in my life:" adding, almost desperately, "Oh, how *am* I to convince you?"

I looked at her blankly; and I suppose she was disconcerted by my astounded face, for, for the first time, she lost the assurance that seemed her main characteristic, and released me almost as if in embarrassment. Probably it was to cover this momentary embarrassment that she went on talking, rapidly regaining her original confidence and aplomb.

"I may as well give you another piece of advice, while I'm about it: take it easy, relax, don't be so anxious, don't rush about the place as you do. It may lead to success in your part of the world, but it won't get you anywhere at Eagles' Nest. And don't be in such a hurry to make changes, either. It stands to reason, things that have been going on in the same way for hundreds of years can't be changed in five minutes."

"There's something in that," I admitted, surveying her speculatively, though I was more concerned with an idea of my own than with her pronouncements. "How do you come to know such a lot about Eagles' Nest and its ways?" I asked; but got no reply.

My question might have been lost in the noise of traffic, for now the flower seller had moved a few steps away, and was no longer fully in my field of vision. I couldn't be certain what she was doing; she may only have touched her hair; but my impression was that she

made a gesture of some sort, as if waving to someone on the other side of the street. I guessed there must be somebody she didn't want me to see over there, for all of a sudden she was in a great hurry to leave, saying a hasty goodbye, and then turning back, her smile flashing out brilliantly as she called, "Don't forget what I've told you . . . and take care not to lose anything else before we meet again."

She then plunged into the traffic so recklessly that I had to smile when I remembered her excuse for getting me into the garden. I lost sight of her while I made my own way across rather more prudently; until, on the other side, I caught a glimpse of a figure not unlike hers turning a corner beside someone dressed in grey.

At this moment, driving her out of my thoughts, the clock began striking the hour at which I'd arranged to meet the chauffeur. The man had his orders to start back then, and certainly wouldn't contravene them by waiting more than a minute or two for me to turn up.

There was no longer any question of taking my picture to the shop, but only of whether, by racing straight to the meeting place, I could avoid being left behind. The relief of finding the car still waiting—though with the engine running and the driver looking out for me anxiously along the street—more than compensated for my disappointment over the sketch. I even felt an unacknowledged relief at being absolved from the necessity of deciding at once what to do about the flower seller's advice. The conscious, thinking part of my mind had, of course, rejected it categorically; but I was aware at a deeper, more instinctual level, that it seemed possible she might be right.

EIGHT

Now for my talk with Penny, I thought unenthusiastically, when I got back from the town. The trip had proved unexpectedly tiring, as well as abortive; and when, after looking for the secretary in a desultory way, I failed to find her in any of her usual haunts, I decided that our conversation could very well be postponed again—there would be plenty of time for it later.

Dinner time came, and I'd still seen nothing of her. I was very surprised then to be told I was to dine alone, waited on by the peasants, without the supervision of either butler or footmen. It was the first time such a thing had happened, and I felt curious about this wholesale absenteeism. I even tried questioning the white-uniformed waiters, but soon gave up, finding that they all responded in the same negative way, standing before me with downcast eyes, their hands in white cotton gloves dangling meek and pathetic, either unable or unwilling to answer a word.

Distressed rather than vexed, I blamed myself for lacking some humane quality that would have overcome the barrier of their humility, whether real or assumed. All I could do was hurry through the meal, not daring to curtail its irksome ceremonial for fear of giving offence; thankful when at last it was over, and they left me alone.

But now the long solitary evening confronted me with

an unexpected ordeal. With a book in my hand, I wandered from room to room, unable to settle down anywhere, more conscious than ever before of the oppressive atmosphere of the silent great house, which seemed to tolerate me only on sufferance. I could imagine the servants swooping upon me, were I to sit down, throwing me out, not satisfied till they'd removed the least trace of my presence, and restored the room to its unblemished perfection. The fantasy seemed so preposterous that I forced myself to sit down at once; I *would* concentrate on my book. Everything possible had been provided for my comfort; but the elegant chairs, softly shaded lamps, the boxes of cigarettes temptingly open, all seemed as if roped off in a museum. Though I'd made myself sit down, I was up again a few moments later, resuming my lonely and restless prowl.

My unsatisfactory, indefinite position in the household was responsible, I supposed, for making all its luxury seem unapproachable: at the same time stirring some deep-buried recollection I couldn't bring into focus, which disturbed me with its lost unhappy associations.

The absolute stillness became more obtrusive as time went on, until it seemed to develop a menacing quality I could hardly endure. To make matters worse, I must still, without knowing it, have been under the influence of the morning's events. Distant reminders of my lost youth still twitched my nerves and intruded upon my senses; sounds of traffic, footsteps and voices, kept coming into the background of my thoughts, with snatches of talk and glimpses of scenes from the town; while I paced the empty rooms, where my own steps

were the only disturbers of the intense hush. Aroused by the brief visit to more lively scenes, all my instincts rebelled against this solemn grandeur, which surrounded me now with its blank silent hostility, repressive, inhuman, dead.

"Tonight the place is more like a morgue than a museum," I thought, looking at my watch, only to find that barely five minutes had passed since I last looked at it—it seemed more like five hours. When would Penny come back? Why had she gone off without telling me? Unwillingly, I had to admit that I actually missed her. Though I never seemed to feel anything more than a sort of amused tolerance for her company, I now very much wished she were here, if only to act as a buffer between me and this appalling weight of silence, which made its oppressiveness felt almost physically. Trying to find some rational explanation of it, I wondered whether the heaviness in the air meant the approach of a storm.

The heat was certainly greater than usual, and showed no sign of abating, though darkness had long since fallen. When I came, in the course of my wanderings, to those parts of the house which were not air-conditioned, I found them stifling, and hurried back to the cooler rooms. But there the sense of being hermetically sealed up was claustrophobic and almost worse, driving me on again.

Finding myself at the foot of the staircase, I suddenly made up my mind, early as it was, to go to my own room. It would be infernally hot; but I should at least be able to sit and read there without being made to feel like a trespasser. Just as I started up, the sound of a

door opening made me pause, thinking, "Here she comes, at last," irritated with Penny for going out, and with myself for my irrational irritation.

That anyone else could be coming, never entered my head. It was quite a shock to see the butler threading his way through the magnificent furniture. He only wished me a quiet Good evening, as he passed, but I felt unreasonably disconcerted, gazing after his vaguely verger-like back—suddenly it occurred to me that he would not have gone out dressed like that. But, if he hadn't been off duty, why had he not officiated at dinner? All at once, influenced, no doubt by the flower-seller's hints, I got the impression that something mysterious was going on in the house, of which I knew nothing; the butler's black retreating form suddenly looked secretive, and, on a sudden impulse, I called out, "Just a moment!"

"Yes, sir?" The man-servant turned, looking up at me with professional deference, and a total lack of any other expression.

"Where's the secretary?" I asked, chasing an idea I hadn't yet worked out. "Has she gone into the town?"

"So I believe, sir."

Seeing in my mind's eye the flick of a grey skirt vanishing round a corner, beside a substantial figure possibly belonging to the flower seller who was so well-informed about Eagles' Nest, I felt excited, on the verge of an important discovery. Several hitherto disconnected uncomprehended happenings trembled on the brink of a new and coherent meaning, like the pellets of quicksilver children manipulate into forming a pattern. Would I be able to make these events reveal their true

design? It all seemed to depend on whether I could extract the right information from the man at the foot of the stairs. His deferentially inclined head contained all that I wanted to know. "Why didn't she come in the car with me?" I asked, looking down on that locked box of secrets, which I must open.

"As far as I know," came the cautious reply, "she had no intention of going when your trip was arranged."

"So she went on the spur of the moment?" I raised my eyebrows, knowing perfectly well the utter impossibility of any impulsive act of this kind, on the part of those subjected to the cast-iron régime of Eagles' Nest. To this, no response was forthcoming.

Looking down on the long-faced silent fellow, the locked receptacle of secrets, into which I was trying to break, I wondered what sort of man he really was. Until now, I seemed never to have looked beyond the butler's uniform, as though those clothes of obsolete cut formed an impenetrable disguise. And now, though I looked long and steadily, I still failed to penetrate the professional impassive façade; I didn't know how to proceed with my investigation.

The other, evidently well aware of his superior position, was now surveying me as if thinking, "How much shall I let him know?" Something of the kind must really have been in his mind, for, keeping his eyes fixed upon me, he said deliberately: "The master thought she was looking tired, and told her to take the rest of the day off."

The master? For an instant, I was baffled by the unfamiliar title; then I thought indignantly, "So that was the secret": though I'm pretty sure outwardly I

was as calm as he. Certainly, my voice sounded perfectly cool, saying, "So the Administrator has come back . . ."

"Yes sir. He returned this morning, shortly after you left."

I fancied the speaker's tone contained a good deal of satisfaction, and, afraid of what my face might reveal, I turned it away from him, looking up at the gallery, hanging above like a mysterious ship of shadows. My head was crowded with questions I didn't ask: "How long have you known he was coming today? Why didn't you tell me? Which of you got the news first?" etc. But I simply said: "Will you please ask if I can speak to him some time this evening?"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, sir. The master is seeing no one until the morning."

The smooth reply floated up to me from the man I was no longer looking at, but of whom I was as acutely aware as if we had still been face to face. Ever since my arrival, a sort of defensive antagonism had divided us. Now, by a swift unexplained transition, we were uncapably joined in mortal combat; which I found gratifying, as though a necessary step had been taken in the development of the situation. Slowly and with deliberation, I continued on my way upstairs, saying, as frigidly as I could, and without turning my head: "I'd be obliged, all the same, if you would ask. I'll be in my room if there's any message."

Though I didn't really expect the Administrator to see me that night—it seemed improbable that he would even receive my request—the excitement I'd felt at the prospect of finding out something important did not leave me, in spite of nothing having come to light.

A restless craving for action possessed me now; the very last thing I wanted to do was sit down and read. I took my coat off, and switched on the fan, in spite of which dark patches of sweat were soon spreading over my shirt in the ovenlike heat. There was a conspiracy against me; that was obvious. With extreme vividness, I pictured the butler standing with Penny in some dark corner, whispering, and glancing at me conspiratorially, as I innocently passed by, unaware of their presence as of their interest.

I particularly resented Penny's duplicity, which struck me as exceptionally mean—quite unpardonable. She must have sent me into the town so that I'd be out of the way when the A. arrived, giving him the impression I'd gone off to amuse myself instead of waiting to welcome him, while she stayed at her post, working herself to death. What a two-faced little schemer she was! I ought to have been guided by my intuition, instead of fighting against the vague distrust I'd had of her all along. It was exasperating to think I'd wasted pity on her, while all the time she'd been in league with the butler, my arch-enemy.

Wiping my face with my handkerchief, vaguely meaning to look at it in the mirror, I found that one of those strangely significant unconscious acts one sometimes performs had brought me in front of the picture, once a source of enchantment, but now only associated with depression and sense of loss. Suddenly it seemed important to find out why my feelings about it had changed—far more important than the petty intrigues of a butler and an inefficient secretary. How could I have allowed such trivialities to fill my mind?

Switching on all the lights, I filled the room with a soft clear brilliance in which everything was unequivocal and distinct as in the comfortable light of day. But then, while I was staring at the picture intently, my eyes seemed unable to focus correctly, a change took place in the very quality of the light, changing even the outer aspect of familiar everyday forms. It was as though the light itself broke into countless diamond-facets, which moved, mothlike, in front of the portrait, a fluttering glimmering swarm, radiantly encircling and outlining the painted head with their winglike pulsating flames . . . And, while this was happening before my eyes, a corresponding upsurge of potent magic swept me towards the sky, where burning clouds stood like angels, serenely bright, their incandescent wings of protection spread wide.

This happened instantaneously. In a flash, the tremendous wings were furled and the clouds dissolving . . . a storm of fiery particles raining down . . . like feathers, like sparks, or fireflies . . . blowing along dark corridors of the mind . . . already an almost hallucinatory experience . . . its authenticity already doubtful . . . night-magic, born of the near-tropical heat and the heavy darkness outside . . . I certainly wasn't asleep; but neither was I fully awake . . . suspended between the two states . . . and with me, a sense of loss; to which I now added the memory of the picture's spell-binding enchantment, though not of its actual spell.

My first disconsolate sensation might have grown naturally out of that loss, so subtly, so imperceptibly, did it come upon me; a sadness I couldn't trace. Only gradually, by slow degrees, and keeping my eyes fixed

on those sombre colours, did I become aware of their responsibility for my dismay; as if the painting obscurely conditioned my frame of mind—whereupon its mazy cross hatchings began to fill me with such horror that I might have been caught and imprisoned hopelessly by the complex brush strokes. Yet, being still susceptible to its fascination, I was also charmed; oscillating between the poles of attraction and repulsion, I had no clear idea of what I was supposed to have seen . . . what revelation . . . what face . . . I was further than ever from knowing anything about the picture, or my feelings for it. And suddenly, at the height of my confusion and indecision, all emotional content seemed withdrawn from it; I was looking at an oblong of darkness, a hole in the wall, and that was all.

This I took, without knowing why, as an assertion of my own independence, as if I had escaped from something dangerously strong. Now the sense of loss no longer perturbed me. Not yet having identified the portrait consciously with the hero-figure of my imaginings, I had no cause to connect the Administrator with my ambivalent feelings. But, as I pulled the shirt from my chest, to which it was damply adhering, and turned away from that part of the room, my thoughts at the same time turned to him; and I began to realize he must be somehow involved.

Had I been deceiving myself about my true feelings for him, in much the same way as, for a time, I had deluded myself into believing I was enjoying the luxury of Eagles' Nest? I was far too bewildered to decide just then; but I seemed to have been too much under his

influence in the past; now I had broken away.

None of this, I perceived, had any connexion with the need to clear my reputation and prevent the butler from blackening it any more. And, the incoherent, half-dreaming state I'd been trying to explore giving place to more lucid thought, I saw—glancing at my watch—that it was too late now to hope for an interview before morning. But I couldn't let the whole night pass without doing anything; and, as I happened to be near the desk, I at once sat down there to write the Administrator a letter. My enemies had, for the moment, made it impossible for me to put my case in person; but they could not stop me defending myself in writing—why hadn't I done so long before? Now that I had thought of vindicating my conduct in this way, it seemed obviously the right thing to do.

My first intention was to record all that related to the circumstances of my arrival, impersonally, with complete candour, neither adding nor suppressing a single detail. But I soon saw that a letter of this sort would be far too long; in order to make everything perfectly clear I'd have to write a whole book. The sheets already written were more than a busy man could reasonably be expected to read. I tore them up, and started all over again; this time merely writing a short note requesting an immediate interview.

Afterwards, it was some time before I was able to sleep. And, lying awake in the hot darkness, I decided to make Upjohn the bearer of my note in the morning, rather than one of his pale-skinned superiors. Since he had lately become more friendly, I was surprised, when the time came, by the vehemence of his refusal; until it

occurred to me that he must be afraid of their reprisals; when I explained that I would take all responsibility for his conduct; if anyone asked him, he was to say I had ordered him to take the letter. I wished I could reinforce my words with a few coins, though, to do him justice, he didn't seem to be holding out for a tip. It was more as if he wanted to say something to me that was beyond the scope of his small vocabulary, as, locked in the dumb distress of his inarticulateness, he gazed at me out of eyes melancholy as those of a sick ape.

When I at last managed to persuade him to act as my messenger, and, reluctantly taking the note, he departed, promising to deliver it at once, he left behind him an atmosphere of discouragement and despondency, making me feel I'd got off to a bad start. Besides depressing me, his reluctance had made me late for breakfast. But I couldn't hurry. Although I had only just got out of bed, I felt tired already, limp in the relentless heat. Even as early in the day as this, the air was horribly oppressive; the silver brushes belonging to my grand room were disagreeably hot to the touch. And when, on my way down, I passed through the heavy door to the gallery, the sudden drop in temperature set me shivering. All night I had been lying directly under the fan, and, as I entered the dining-room, the unpleasant possibility of having caught some kind of chill was at the back of my mind, introduced by a slight headache I'd only just noticed.

I was hoping Penny would have finished and left the room. But she was still sitting there, though the servants had been dismissed. I said good morning, and sat down without looking at her. I felt no more active resentment;

I hadn't the energy to be angry with her; I simply didn't want to talk, or to bother with her at all. My coming interview with the Administrator—though I wasn't giving it any constructive thought—seemed to fill my head, leaving no room for the secretary.

Yet I couldn't ignore this sham Quaker girl, sitting there as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. I could feel her eyes on me all the time; she seemed to be willing me to look at her; and my will, already depleted by the struggle with Upjohn's, had not enough strength to hold out against her. Suddenly realizing that, even now, she hadn't told me about the return of our mutual employer, her fake demureness enraged me so much that the words, "I wonder you're not ashamed . . ." burst from me before I could stop them. This made me angrier than ever, because, through my lack of restraint, I'd done the very thing I most wished to avoid, and started a conversation, or even a quarrel, with her. Since I was now committed to it, I went on in a more moderate tone: "Don't you think it was a pretty mean trick, sending me into town yesterday?"

Instead of answering, she simply gave me her round-eyed stare, as if utterly at a loss. "Oh, spare me the innocent act!" I exclaimed, in disgust. "You know as well as I do what I mean—you wanted me out of the way when the A. arrived—"

"No, no!" she interrupted, suddenly agitated, pressing her hand to her mouth in a childish gesture of horror, seemingly so spontaneous that I wondered for a second if I could be mistaken. But of course she was only acting, as usual. I felt a fresh access of rage, noticing that she'd showed no surprise at my possessing the

information she still withheld, indicating that the butler must have reported what he'd said to me on the stairs. The mental picture invoked by the thought of their collusion so disgusted me that I again burst out viciously:

"I can understand that long-faced bastard in black hating me because he was made to look small on my account the day I first came. But why you take sides with him is beyond me. I should have thought I'd have been much more use to you as a friend than an enemy—frankly, I think you've behaved like a perfect fool."

The girl's consternation increased visibly as I was speaking, and now she gasped, "No! You've got it all wrong! It isn't like that at all!" half rising, then sinking back, as if overcome, and gazing at me wide-eyed, murmuring: "Surely you can't really think I'm your enemy?"

Though she went on repeating, "You've got everything wrong!" I was too firmly convinced of her deceitfulness to consider anything she might say, and, interrupting, forced her to listen to me.

"Don't you see the mess all this double-crossing is bound to get you into finally?" I asked sternly. "You can't keep me away from the A. for ever, and when I see him, the truth will come out. It won't sound very nice, what you've been up to . . ." There was no reply. And her silence made me see how crushed and miserable she looked, staring at the dregs in her cup, while one hand strayed aimlessly on the tablecloth, making foolish ineffectual motions, and looking lost and pathetic. Suddenly it was if a stern voice told me, "And what you're doing doesn't look very nice, either." Suddenly

I didn't want to say any more, even though she *was* the butler's accomplice. Simply in order to show that I was capable of tackling the pair of them, I concluded:

"The truth may come out sooner than you think!"

I said this portentously, trying to make her believe I had secret resources of which she knew nothing; in which I was surprisingly successful, for she quickly gave me a frightened look and asked what I meant.

As on a former occasion, I had the impression that her eyes were getting bigger and rounder as they gazed at me; but this time they didn't suggest anything as deadly as gun muzzles, merely reminding me of the ape-like pathos I'd noticed in Upjohn's eyes, helpless, dumb and mournful. I felt as if I were ill-treating an animal, a creature hopelessly in my power. I couldn't go on frightening her, much as she deserved it for the way she had tricked and betrayed me. "There's no need to look so scared," I said, undoing all the good work I'd done. "I only meant that I'll be seeing the A. this morning. I sent a note asking him to spare me a few minutes, and I'm sure he will." Now I spoke in a casual manner which I hoped would normalize the situation and provide a convenient full stop. I really felt well-disposed towards the girl, sorry I had upset her. Nothing could have astounded me more than her extravagant melodramatic reaction.

I couldn't imagine why she abruptly jumped up, looking wild and distraught; or why she came rushing at me as if demented, calling out in a wailing, distracted voice, as she ran round the table: "Why . . . ? Why . . . ? Oh, why did you have to do it . . . ?"

I had jumped up too; but, impeded by the folds of

the tablecloth, and by the large table napkin that had wrapped itself round my knees, I was not quick enough to prevent her clutching me by both arms, pinning them to my sides. Through the sleeves, her fingers dug painfully into my flesh, she shook me to and fro with such rough violence that my hair fell over my eyes, blinding me, and reminding me again of my headache, which this treatment did not improve.

"Stop it! Let me go! immediately, do you hear me?"

I ordered, as fiercely as was possible in the circumstances. "Have you gone crazy?" It was difficult to free myself without hurting her; she seemed quite insensitive to any pain. I was obliged to use a certain amount of force to control her, not daring to let go of her in case she started the tussle all over again. Then she burst into tears like a child, openly blubbering, while I wiped her face with my handkerchief, and patiently explained: "There's nothing to cry about. I'm not going to report you—I never meant to. I only said that to give you a fright and show you what a dangerous game you were playing."

Cautiously, I released her, very glad to see that her violence was spent. But she still went on crying, dropping her face in her hands, tears dripping through her fingers. Hadn't she heard me? Didn't she understand? Or what was the reason for this excessive and prolonged grief? "Listen! I shan't say a word about you to anyone—have you got that?" I gave her a little shake as I spoke, to make sure she was listening. "You can trust me. I'm not an informer . . . It's not the fashion where I come from . . ." I smiled down at her, a little touched, a little amused, and very bewildered.

"As if I cared about that!" she succeeded in bringing out, with an ungracious vehemence that stung me into retorting: "Then what the hell are you crying about?" Seeing her face disintegrating again in childish ungoverned grief, I gave up hope of getting any sense out of her at the moment, simply pushing my handkerchief into her hands. "I only wanted you to like me a little," came indistinctly out of its folds. More to myself than to her, I repeated, "To *like* you?" with faint sarcasm, thinking she'd gone about it in a very odd way.

Her tears were rapidly drowning my pity, the sound of them had begun to get on my nerves. Just when it was essential for me to keep cool and clear-headed for the coming interview, her crying had started to undermine my composure: with this realization, indignant resentment swept away the remains of my gentler feelings. I no longer cared why she was crying, I was only concerned with preserving my own calm, when I urged her to stop, adding in a sharper tone: "That damned butler-fellow is sure to come snooping round in a minute. For heaven's sake pull yourself together before he turns up—or else——" I wanted to say, "Or else get out," but couldn't quite manage this crudity, though it seemed justified by what I considered her selfishness—if it was nothing worse. What a luscious titbit of scandal it would be if the butler were to find her shut up in here with me, and in floods of tears . . .

The suspicion forming at the back of my mind at last thrust its way into consciousness, swelling until, like the noise of her crying, it filled the room. "I believe you want someone to find us—you're trying to compromise me . . ."

Staring at her bent head and heaving shoulders, I was thinking that if she were innocent, she would surely try to refute the charge, or at least deny it. But she didn't even look up; her only response was a fresh outburst of sobbing. All I could see was her foreshortened brow; and, in my own head, these two conspirators, hatefully whispering. Instead of the girl who a moment ago had aroused my compassion, I seemed to be dealing with an actress, a schemer, who played whatever part suited her dubious plans—whose crocodile tears had deceived me.

Pressing my hand to my forehead, I suddenly wondered why I was still standing there. I should have walked out of the room and left her some minutes ago. Why hadn't it occurred to me to end the situation by this simple method? Now, when I turned to the door, I saw it beginning to open, and realized that I'd waited too long; until it was too late.

Murmuring, "Talk of the devil . . ." I hastily put on an indifferent face with which to confront the butler; who, having taken in the situation at a glance, thereafter kept his eyes to the front, and his expression discreetly blank. Penny might have been invisible to him, as she fled past and out of the room, her face still hidden in the large handkerchief. He did not look at me either, or gave any sign of having heard me speak, merely announcing, as if to the world at large, that the Administrator would send for me in an hour's time. Then he withdrew, closing the door behind him without a sound.

"Well, that's torn it," I said to myself. For some reason, this childish comment amused me, and I continued in the same vein, telling myself with unconvin-

cing bravado that I might as well finish my breakfast—it would probably be my last meal at Eagles' Nest. I believe I even swallowed some mouthfuls of tepid coffee before I too left the room.

NINE

After the coolness downstairs, the atmosphere of my room, in spite of the awnings which kept the sun off the windows, was enervating as that of a turkish bath. As I shut the door, I tugged off my jacket and then pressed my hands to my head. It was not aching badly—not yet; but there was an ominous feeling as if strings were being gradually tightened behind my forehead. My thoughts seemed to be in the utmost disorder, and the sound of Penny's crying still intermittently insinuated itself among them, causing further chaos.

Whether or not she had deliberately staged the scene in the dining room, it had certainly left me in the worst possible state to face my important interview; and the idea of this interview drawing nearer each second produced an uncomfortable sense of urgency. I knew I ought to be thinking about what I was going to say; but as soon as I tried to concentrate, some irrelevant memory from the just-finished episode got in the way. "It's no use; I must cool off first," I thought, going across to the window and leaning out as far as I could without overbalancing.

But still I was no cooler. The awning cut off all the upper part of the view, and below I saw only a huge bed of scarlet and yellow flowers, like unmoving flames, that made me feel hotter than ever. Everything outside seemed unnaturally static, each petal, leaf, blade,

motionless in the windless heat, as if stamped out of metal, stiffened by the sun's intense rays as by a hard frost. No water came into the burning light of my circumscribed vision. I began to long for the sight of the jets and sprays that gave at least an illusion of life and coolness; and, without thinking what I was doing, I touched the spring controlling the blind; which at once shot up out of reach, leaving me exposed to the full onslaught of blazing sunshine.

I supposed it was because I was half-blinded by the sudden impact of dazzling light that I could see no sign of the miniature rainstorms that should have been sprinkling the flowers. It took me a few more seconds to realize that the water was not there. Only gradually, and with growing excitement, could I bring myself to believe that, for the first time since my arrival, the life-giving fountains had ceased to play.

Immediately then, the stillness invested everything in sight with a somewhat ominous tension, in which I too seemed involved. Motionless as the leaves, oblivious of the sun beating down on my head, I stood there waiting. Something like a premonition had visited me; though I couldn't possibly have described what I was waiting for, and, indeed, it was scarcely describable; being no less than the climax of all those experiences by which the secret world had, from time to time, drawn my attention to its existence. The underlying significance of these experiences was about to be clarified; and I, together with the scene before me, was caught in this instant of suspense, awaiting the revelation, as in the curve of a breaking wave, magically arrested . . .

The mysterious quality of my anticipation gave a

slight unreality to all appearances. The gardens, flat as a painted backcloth, seemed bleached to ghostliness by the sun; the distant rocks hovered imponderable in the fluidity of their countless mutations; the judge-shaped crags floated like ephemeral landmarks in a dream—with faint surprise, I saw that today they were wearing a new adornment; a white wispy ethereal sprouting of wigs or wings. But I scarcely had time to perceive this new whiteness—not associating it with cloud since I'd never seen a cloud in the sky here—before all thought of it was obliterated by a glimpse of what I was waiting for: I had a sudden inkling of the secret; of shadow and substance made one; of my everyday personality merged with the stranger self of which I was only sometimes aware. Then the moment of revelation was gone, before I had grasped it . . . and the mountain at which I was gazing slid gently forward and fell apart.

For a second I felt slightly dizzy, but this soon passed, leaving me with no feeling either of reality or of surprise. A mountain had broken in pieces, and that was all. I was not concerned with the conduct of mountains, but with that barely glimpsed integration of inter-related patterns; the harmony reconciling all discords, resolving all conflicts, that, if only I could understand it, should lead to total awareness and total understanding, explain everything, and put me in contact with the reality of the universe.

But there were too many distractions. Already the inward vision was growing dim, overshadowed by what was happening in front of my eyes; which was spectacular enough to stir the most stolid observer. As I watched the massive judicial outline grow up again,

intact, in the sky, some still-functioning rational part of my brain told me I had witnessed an optical illusion due to cloud formation. But the secret sub-world of dreams and magic was all the time encroaching upon the real, as, one after another, the mountains fell, broke, and grew together again.

Only a small commonsense part of me, recognising a local weather freak, explicable in scientific terms, still remained anchored at the everyday level.

But it was from somewhere in the far reaches of imagination that I watched the whiteness above the summits meet and extend, forming a straight line that ran the whole length of the range. This white line remained fixed; while from it a cloudy deluge began to pour down, a weird white soundless Niagara streaming out of the sky. Materializing from nowhere, out of the otherwise cloudless blue, the incredible torrent instantly obliterated the mountains and came sweeping on, overwhelming everything as it came. Though I was directly in its path, what I felt was awe, not alarm, as though the astounding cataract did not threaten me personally: and, sure enough, it halted a few yards from my window. There, for no reason that I could see, the cloud began coiling back on itself, slowly evaporating in upward spray.

Eagles' nest had been spared for the moment; allowed a precarious survival on the edge of that unearthly cascade. But I didn't doubt that in due course it too would be engulfed, with all its treasures, doomed by whatever now-broken spell had conjured its enchanted beauty out of the stony waste-land; a beauty never meant to give pleasure to human eyes, the destruction

of which I could contemplate almost with satisfaction, telling myself it was an act of intrinsic justice.

Confused by marvels, dizzy from the sun's heat, I could hardly distinguish fact from hallucination, and did not wonder why I alone should be saved from the ruin of all around me. I simply felt certain I was secure, as if the cloudfall had wrapped me in its protection—an unreality nothing could penetrate—so that I was magically insulated from the real world. I could not take my eyes off the ghostly torrent unrolling out of the sky and so close I could almost have touched it, dissolving in its slow upward fume just outside my window. Its airy outlandish loveliness charmed me and kept me spellbound. My sensations were very much like those I used to experience when I escaped from the dreary round of my life at the store in dreams of my absent protector.

In those days, his magic figure, an image of imagination rather than memory, had provided me with a similar kind of sanctuary in the unreal; a fantasy to which I could retire when reality grew too unpleasant. I had lost it because I had come here, breaking the mysterious bond between us, and transforming him from an enchanter into an ordinary human being—it was I who was responsible. Yet I irrationally blamed him for the loss, and now gladly gave my allegiance to the more dependable unreality in the sky. Renouncing my former hero, I abandoned myself with all my heart to that high mysterious manifestation, which could never fail me—as I felt he had—by becoming part of my concrete existence; and which promised me that nothing real mattered—that the interview with him was unimpor-

tant, or would never take place. Carefree and irresponsible, I let myself float without circumspection in easy acceptance, no single definite tie binding me to the solid world; until, interrupting this peaceful dissociation, an unexpected movement below happened to catch my eye.

One of the peasant gardeners was crouching in the great bed of fiery flowers, his head and shoulders protruding, tortoise-like, between their tough stems, gaping up at me open-mouthed, with the same fascinated fixity with which I myself had been watching the fabulous fall of cloud. As soon as the man knew he'd been noticed, he scrambled off on all fours, with the awkward scuttling agility of a wounded insect—a sight so repulsive to me that I was jerked back abruptly to my surroundings.

Although the peasant had vanished, I turned away from the window, back to the room, where reality of a kind still held sway. I began to wake up to the claims of the concrete world: to be aware of the heat, of my headache, of the interview for which I ought to have been preparing. But my acknowledgement of these things was grudging and incomplete. The attraction of the other world, of the dream, was still paramount.

And I was still half dreaming, when a footman came to escort me to the apartments occupied by the head of the house. I seemed to be acting in a charade, I couldn't make the situation come real, as I went with him through the empty corridors. Glancing at the handsome, slightly brutal-faced young man in his archaic dress, I felt I was being escorted by this young flunky to a place of execution or trial . . . I seemed to have been in some incredible half-sinister dream, ever since I arrived. Although I still felt comfortably detached from my

destiny—which was outside my control, governed by the extraneous influence of that fantastic and extraordinary spectacle in the sky—because I had for the last few minutes been out of touch with the magic cloud-fall, I now began to feel slightly anxious; I needed to assure myself of its continued existence. As soon as I was left alone to wait, my first act, before even looking round the room, was to rush to the nearest window. That spectral cascade, the apotheosis of the unreal, had become for me the only reality.

But, to my great disappointment, the windows of the air-conditioned room were covered by venetian blinds, the slats of which appeared to have been fixed permanently; at all events, I was unable to make them admit any more of the feeble light; while the space between remained so narrow that nothing whatever was to be seen outside.

Frustrated in this way, altogether deprived of my insulating vision, I once again had the impression that I was waking up to reality. And, this time, the awakening was much more complete. Shocked to realize I had forgotten all about the interview I had requested so urgently, I made my first serious effort to return to the concrete world, fixing my attention resolutely on what was in front of me.

I was in an office-like room, plainly and almost severely furnished, in marked contrast to the sumptuousness of the rest of the house. With vague dismay, I saw a solitary dark picture hanging over the desk, which, in the dimness, seemed to be a replica of the one in my room. But, going closer, I was relieved to find that this was unmistakably a portrait of the Administrator,

though painted in such low tones as to be unrecognizable except at close quarters.

It was a further relief to discover that, though my headache had become worse since I'd stood in the blazing sunshine, my brain seemed more or less lucid. Trying out my critical faculty, I at once decided the picture gave quite a false idea of my patron, who was shown in ceremonial robes, standing in a dramatic attitude, with his arm upraised as if threateningly.

I suppose that guilt, due to the transference of my loyalty to the cloud, was responsible for the exaggerated partisanship which now made me quite indignant about the artist's misconception. And I was still studying the slightly fantastic, slightly sinister figure he had delineated, when the original entered the room.

Now that I was in front of the man who had known me at a time when I still retained, as I thought, much of my original promise, not yet having realized how adversity had marked me down for its own, I felt some of the confidence of those days come back to me. Finding that I could speak to him naturally and without embarrassment, I became optimistic, almost believing it would be possible to pick up our relationship where it had ended, as if no long period of failure had intervened.

The Administrator sat down at the desk under the window, where he was in shadow, inviting me to take the chair opposite. But, instead, I remained standing, and, as I went on with my belated story, put my hands on the desk, leaning towards him as if to compel his closer attention. There was not, in fact, very much to tell him. But I was so anxious to explain exactly how

I had come to arrive at Eagles' Nest in a state bordering on collapse, that my account grew involved and over-elaborate; the very intensity of my desire to be clear and concise made me confused. I knew I was going on far too long; failing to convey the right impression; and, losing my optimism and confidence—which had been, anyhow, remembered, rather than genuine—I almost wished he would interrupt me.

When I finished at last, and he still made no comment, the silence became disturbing. Knowing I hadn't convinced him, I began to feel really alarmed. The room was becoming darker; and this suggested to me that I'd been seeing things as I wished them to be, rather than as they were in reality. Had his face ever really looked friendly? Now that I could no longer make out its expression I was not sure. Unable to recognise anything definitely familiar about the black figure across the desk, I had the idea that a stranger was sitting there watching me with invisible eyes. Then, recoiling from this unpleasant notion, I tried to concentrate on making my story sound more plausible; as it was true, it hadn't occurred to me that it might be doubted. And now I racked my brains unsuccessfully for some additional phrase that would make it seem authentic; everything relevant had already been said; I could think of no more to add.

Rapidly becoming demoralized by the deterioration of the situation that had seemed so promising a minute or two ago, I uncertainly brought out: "I know there's only my word for all this . . . perhaps it doesn't sound very probable. The best proof I can give you is by my work—as soon as I start working in the library you'll

see that I'm quite reliable and conscientious . . . not the least irresponsible . . . that's why I'm so anxious to begin at once . . ." I was all the time peering at the dark shape opposite, distracted by the lack of any response and only just remembered to add hurriedly: "Though of course I'm most grateful for this holiday. It's done me a lot of good. I needed it, I can see now, because I feel so much fresher . . . perfectly fit to begin my library work . . ."

Surely he must say something now. Such a long unbroken silence was distinctly odd, as well as disturbing. Then, all of a sudden, I thought of an explanation so simple and obvious that I was convinced it must be the true one. Very likely there already was a librarian, and I was intended for some quite different post. By assuming all along that I was to work in that special capacity, I'd made things awkward for the Administrator; a man of his kindly considerate nature might well feel embarrassed, not liking to consign me to a less well paid position, or to work I might consider inferior, or beneath me. Certain I'd hit on the right reason for his silence, I was much relieved, and, eager to show I had no foolish prejudices, again leaned forward across the desk, saying: "I only mentioned the library because I worked there before. But of course I'm willing to make myself useful in any way I can—indoors or out."

A momentary regretful vision floated before me, as I spoke, of the librarian's cosy quarters; but, though I had rather set my heart on working there in seclusion, I quickly persuaded myself it would have been a mistake, a regression, and that, as I was starting a new life, it ought to be new in every respect. The moment seemed

to have taken on a peculiar significance, as though, precisely now, and now only, I was about to begin this new life on which I'd set such high hopes, and all that had so far taken place had been a kind of prelude or preparation. "I'm not just saying that—but I'm sure you must know I really mean it." Suddenly I recalled that wonderful moment when the sight of the advertisement rescued me from despair, and a sudden wave of almost romantic enthusiasm made me go on with unaccustomed expansiveness:

"You needn't think I've got any illusions left about myself . . . I've been through a lot since I last saw you in town . . . I've been right down to the very bottom. It's been hammered into me that my training is worse than useless when it comes to earning a living in other ways, so I'll gladly undertake anything—even manual work. I'm much stronger than I look . . ." I must have been quite carried away, for I actually slipped one arm out of its sleeve, and flexed it like a boy showing off his muscles.

But, receiving no response of any description from the inscrutable featureless form in the shadows, I felt chilled and foolish and slightly ashamed, and hastily put on my jacket again. How dark it was getting! Surely the downward river of cloud must have started to overwhelm Eagles' Nest—it was more like midnight than mid-morning. The picture had been swallowed up by the gloom; in an attempt to control my uneasiness, I was trying to remember its exact position; and this was how I came to witness its sudden fantastic glorification. One moment there was no sign of it, nothing but shadows; the next, it had re-appeared, distinctly revealed

in its own light; or rather, in the light of the painted figure, emerging, minatory and impressive, surrounded by luminous rays. Immediately, as I stared incredulously, the man whose portrait it was stood up, placing himself just in front of it, so that its glimmering radiance seemed to emanate from his person. If I hadn't had my eyes fixed on the very spot, I would never have noticed how the picture had been lit up first, and the supernatural effect would have been much more telling. Even now, in spite of my contempt for the childish theatrical trick, I couldn't help being impressed by that fabulous figure, ennobled by its encircling brightness.

But then I was disgusted, disillusionment overwhelmed me. What did he take me for? How could he descend, with me, of all people, to such an infantile fraud, fit only to deceive credulous ignorant peasants? Obviously, I had been altogether mistaken in him. My hero-benefactor didn't exist, never had existed, except in my imagination. Now I felt I hated him for assuming the phosphorescent halo that had destroyed my illusion—I hated everyone in the world. Remembering how I'd wanted to rush out on Christmas Eve and compel people to know me, I believed that I'd really hated them passionately, though at the time I had been longing for human contact.

But another memory was painfully resurrecting itself from beneath the oblivion I had heaped upon it; I could no longer suppress its ominous stirrings, which affected even my eyes—I saw the shadowy room through the transparency of another, where bookshelves soared to the loftier ceiling of the library of the town house in

which I'd worked for this same man long ago. His large white hand, well-shaped, marmoreal, ghostly, shutting back and forth there, re-wove the shame and anguish of that long-dead day; while, in the present, his low but resounding voice dramatically proclaimed:

"You will not be working in any capacity at Eagles' Nest."

The words, thrown without warning into the midst of my double-time, were in some way horribly startling and shocking, investing everything with a nightmare instability. The dimensions of the room still seemed fluid, unstable, even though the library faded out, leaving only the grievous sense of what had occurred there. No wonder instinct had warned me against coming here, I thought; the bitterness of betrayal, added to the bitterness of unmerited failure, now burst out in the words:

"I suppose this is your idea of a joke! I suppose you think it's amusing to bring me all this way just to tell me you've no use for me here. Of course you never meant me to stay, because of that old story about my discharge——" I stopped, with the sensation of pulling up on the edge of a precipice. Every word was heavy and dangerous with the influence of the past, and I dared not go on. A train seemed to be roaring through my head, where, like a carpet unrolling, I saw all the towns and villages, the lakes, forests, mountains, rivers, past which I had travelled to get here—and must travel all that way back again; the tremendous journey had been for nothing. FOR NOTHING . . . FOR NOTHING . . . the wheels chattered faster and faster, chasing along lines of pain at the back of my eyes, which ended abruptly,

twisted, torn up . . . to my horror, I found myself blinking back tears . . .

Another silence was growing up in the room, while I stood silent and downcast, stunned. After my brief outburst, I no longer felt angry or even indignant. What was the use of talking? It was too late to change anything. I couldn't even make the effort of lifting my head. I didn't want to see or hear anything more in this room; especially, I didn't want to see or hear any more of this man, who made use of calculated effects of lighting and gesture, and spoke with an actor's voice. When some move of his compelled my attention, it seemed to require my whole strength to look up.

No fire-ringed dramatic figure confronted me now. Daylight, or as much of it as the room had held originally, had returned. The picture was once more unilluminated. So much I observed at one glance, letting my gaze settle afterwards on the Administrator's hand, with its long, strong-looking fingers, its motions all very precise and unhesitating, as it selected a newspaper photograph from among the papers on the desk, and held it out towards me.

I wondered how this crowd of blurred faces could possibly concern me, until I distinguished the banner with its message of welcome. "Miss Hairdressing!" I said the two words aloud, coming alive again, lifted out of my apathy, and beginning to smile to myself, staring at the photograph, where the girl's face, even in this smudged representation, looked friendly and warm. I felt enfolded in intimacy, encouraged, as if she had whispered that there was still hope—that I wasn't completely done for; that Eagles' Nest wasn't the whole

world . . . I wanted to listen to her. But, to my annoyance, the Administrator began to speak, drowning her inward and private murmur with his sonorous rhetorical tones.

"We at Eagles' Nest have our special responsibilities. Our duty is to set an example. The conduct of every one of us must be always above reproach. At the time when this picture was taken you were associated with Eagles' Nest in the public mind. Who knows what damage you may have done by going about with a girl of this type; underlining your intimacy by being photographed with her coat in your arms."

Though I personally did not care a damn for the formal reproof, the slighting reference to my friend impelled me to protest: "She's a charming girl who's done so well in her profession that she lives with her mother at the hotel. I should have thought that was respectable enough—even for Eagles' Nest." I thought of explaining that there was no question of intimacy; that we were strangers and had only struck up an acquaintance on the long journey, and that I had only accidentally been included in the photograph. But the impulse that had moved me to speak up for the girl was not strong enough to extend to my own defence. Besides, I didn't know what line to take; so many points were involved; so many things were wrapped in obscurity: the letter, for instance; why and how had it disappeared? And how long had it been lying about in the typists' office, delaying my coming?

In any case, my attention was diverted to the hand, white and as steady as marble, now holding out a second picture for my inspection. As soon as I saw this

one, my indifference vanished, I asked in excitement, "How on earth did you get hold of this?" not even noticing if there was any reply, as I stooped to peer closely at the much clearer photograph.

It was the exterior of the department store at which I was gazing, its commonplace pretentiousness masked and dignified by encrustations of snow, which also adorned my Christmas angels. But were these really the figures I'd made? Perhaps because I had never seen them in their outdoor position, I hardly recognized them as my creations. One particular angel was remarkably like the man in the picture; I might almost have copied the stern face and admonitory attitude from the portrait on the wall. It was all extremely bewildering . . . I pressed my hand to my forehead, thinking, "I don't remember modelling that face . . . that arm . . ." But was it possible not to recognize shapes one had worked over with such concentration?

Abruptly, the photograph was swept out of my sight, and—as if to add the finishing touch to my confusion—replaced by my sketch with the seven crags in the background looking unmistakably judgeline. In speechless amazement, I stared at it blankly. Undoubtedly it was my sketch; yet, for my sketch to be there on the desk seemed virtually impossible.

My sense of generalized strangeness, originating in the weird weather phenomenon, reinforced by the room's unstable aspect, as well as by all that had taken place in it, had reached its climax. I could no longer distinguish between real and unreal in this dreamlike situation. But now I seemed to feel something new and ominous in the air . . . something was threatening me

. . . I must escape before the dream turned into nightmare.

But the Administrator was speaking again, in a voice so utterly unlike his former declamatory tones that I had to stand listening.

"If only you hadn't forced my hand by your impatience! I've been searching and searching without finding a way out. But I'm sure, in time, I would have found something . . . some ambiguity . . . making it possible for you to stay on here. But by insisting on this interview you've drawn everybody's attention to the affair; I can't hold things up any longer . . ."

More than by the meaning of what he said, I was moved by the inappropriate sound of weariness, sadness, almost of defeat, that had come into his quiet voice. For an instant, I felt the power of the old attraction drawing me to him, investing our relationship with the old mystic significance. But a painful contrary emotion pulled just as strongly the other way . . . directing my eyes to the three objects—set up on the desk like exhibits in court—one of which, at least, could have been obtained only by underhand methods. I failed to see what bearing these three pages from my private life could have on my position here; yet they had been used as evidence against me, to prove that my presence was undesirable.

Though I resented it, I knew there was no possibility of defending myself. It suddenly seemed that all this had happened to me already . . . some time long ago in the past I had been judged and sentenced . . . And now the disconcerting sensation of *deja vue* swept me into the vortex of time . . . years raced past me, devoid of

sequence . . . isolated events shot up and vanished again in the same moment, distorted by lack of perspective. Out of the chaos, emerged the thought, "He has betrayed me"; to be followed immediately by: "Or have I betrayed him?" Helpless in the midst of this mad merry-go-round, I could only wait for it to stop: but, when it did, past and present collapsed upon me in a crushing deadweight, and I couldn't creep out from beneath it.

Gradually, however, I became aware of the need to finish the hopeless business, and quickly too, before the threat in the air materialized, and made everything worse. I noticed the marblelike hand moving towards my sketch, and, for some reason, this seemed to liberate me and my tongue together. "No," I said, on the spur of the moment, seeing that he meant to return it to me. "Please keep it. There was no need for you to go to the trouble of getting someone to fetch it from my room when I wasn't there. I'm only too glad to make you a present of it. Do keep it as a little memento of my visit to Eagles' Nest. I'm not much good as a painter, I know; but it's all honest work, as far as it goes—no faking, or tricks with luminous paint." I had hurried to the door while I was saying this, which I thought would get me out of the room in pretty good order. But I hadn't time to turn the handle, looking back to say goodbye, immediately arrested by the unexpected expression of hurt sadness, which accompanied the words:

"Is it fair to condemn me without knowing all the facts?" Bewildered by this improbable appeal, which was the last thing I'd anticipated, and which I couldn't possibly ignore, I was forced to listen to the low sad

voice going on: "People don't understand Eagles' Nest because, to us, everything is a symbol of something else, and every sign can be interpreted in various ways——"

But here, thinking this sounded sheer pretentious rubbish, I hardened my heart to interrupt. "Isn't it a bit late in the day to explain Eagles' Nest, after you've kicked me out?" Yet I still didn't open the door, held back by some emotion that seemed to go down to the very roots of my being; hearing the pathos in the total absence of arrogance from that quiet voice, I had to go on listening to what it said.

"I suppose you think, quite naturally, that because I'm master here, I can do as I like. Actually, I assure you, this is far from being the case. Although I have to settle all doubtful questions, the decisions are not my own. My task is to administer the existing code as it applies to particular situations. And, in doing this, I'm often forced to sanction things I don't approve of, or give orders conflicting with my personal wishes. Do you think that's easy or pleasant for me?"

Although I was really touched that the speaker should humble himself to make this explanation, during the last few moments, my attention had started to wander; I was now mainly concerned with the danger that obscurely threatened, and seemed to be coming closer and closer, so that I didn't answer. My need to escape was too urgent, too real, for me to think of anything else. I was no longer really listening, when he went on talking, but simply waiting for him to cease entangling me in this incomprehensible web of words.

"Signs wrongly read, wrongly combined or chosen, can result only in false conclusions, and judgments that

are unreliable. All I ask of you is not to judge me more harshly than our own code, which makes allowances for human limitations, and doesn't expect the impossible—not even of its administrator."

Thinking this marked a period, I was about to take advantage of the fact by hastily saying goodbye, when the speech continued to its conclusion.

"Tradition provides ways of creating a distance between the administrator and such situations as he might otherwise find intolerable. Without the help of these tricks—as you are entitled to call them—I wouldn't be able to carry on at all. Do you honestly blame me for making use of them?"

By now I'd become so impatient that I had only the vaguest notion of what he was asking, though I replied promptly, "No, of course not," somehow sensing that this was the required answer. Yet, though it was compulsorily necessary for me to get out of this room, so dim and secluded that it made the rest of the world seem non-existent, something—perhaps this very impression—kept me from moving. I held the door knob in my hand, but I didn't turn it. Something like a great soundless bell had started an ominous tolling inside my head. The world seemed to tilt . . . to slide a little way into another dimension . . . I was no longer sure where I was, or who was looking at me.

That calm, sculptured face surely belonged in a church; some carved crusader seemed to be looking at me from his tomb. But I saw that the eyes were alive; exceptionally, unnaturally brilliant, they held mine in a hypnosis I couldn't break. Something stirred in their depths which I didn't want to see. All of a sudden, I

knew the danger would come from there . . . and I couldn't escape it. Some half-remembered revelation was rising there of the man I had made my hero . . . and the other within him . . . who was no man . . . not of this earth . . .

Chaos whirled through my head, through the room. I felt I was falling, and instinctively put out my hand—it was a shock when another hand clasped it; whose, I had no idea. In the moment's supreme confusion, I really did not recognize the face before me, or know whether it belonged to a friend or an enemy.

But surely an enemy's voice couldn't be saying so kindly, "You're not well—not fit to travel—why don't you stay a few more days as my guest?" Hearing that tone of genial sincerity, not to be doubted, I felt a warm glow spreading through me . . . Or was it the picture on the wall that so warmly glowed . . . ? I looked at it, and it seemed changed; the arm, formerly raised to chastize me, now lifted to give a benison or a welcome. I could see it, too, much more distinctly; and, as I realized this, I saw that its outline had again become phosphorescent. In an odd flash of lucidity, it occurred to me that the illumination of the painting must be controlled by a floor-switch. And now the association with fraud recalled the series of treacherous acts, premeditated, not to be explained away, that must have led to the removal of the sketch from my room.

The perfidious smiling face of my betrayer emerged from the mists of time past. The tongueless bell dumbly clanging, I recognized the face of all my enemies and oppressors; of all the injustice which had pursued me; of all my fears . . . and, in horrified repudiation,

snatched my hand away, jerked it free.

Even now, for an interminable moment, those mesmeric eyes held me, fixed upon me in strangely severe compassion, transfixing me with the fear of having made a fearful, irreparable mistake. I felt a demented need for some violent demonstration; if I'd been able, I would have shouted something, some question; or fallen upon my knees. But, before I could move or utter a sound, the face withdrew from me, and the eyes were quenched.

At last I could go. At last there was nothing to stop me opening the door. The room had come back into focus . . . but not the same room as it had been before. A superficial resemblance to the other did nothing but emphasize its total strangeness; it was as remote and inaccessible as the tall phantomlike figure I dimly discerned, standing there, far away. In this room, my desperately circling eyes could find no hope, no help, no anything. The mask of deceptive appearance had fallen here, exposing the emptiness it had hidden; each object had put on its ultimate empty face.

This, then, was my final revelation, this negation of all I'd thought real. I was left to the utter absurdity of having imagined a luminous mystic moment would bring forth some apocalyptic stranger to be my protector and friend.

Wherever I looked, I encountered the same blank rejection, as though, by rejecting the hand, I had initiated a mass-reaction in my surroundings. With dreadful finality, the room itself was casting me into outer darkness. I was already demoralized; and now, faced with the chill indifference of everything around me, I grew panic-stricken. I felt the panic of a solitary

benighted traveller, whose guide has vanished, taking with him the only light, as, wrenching the door open blindly, in mindless terror, I stumbled out of the room.

TEN

In the silent corridors of the apparently empty house, my panic quickly subsided into a kind of daze. As far as I can recall, there was no thought in my head, except the determination not to remember the disturbing events concluded by the muted thud of the door I had just heard shut behind me.

The first thing to catch my attention was another door, wide open this time, into the open air. I stopped before I came to it, aware of a sensation like a motor starting up inside me; a pulse of restrained excitement. Although I was quite near this door, my back was against the wall so that I couldn't see out; without in the least understanding why, it seemed necessary to approach with the greatest caution whatever might be on the other side.

Now the vigilantes guarding the frontiers of my conscious mind admitted the memory of the cloud-fall, careful to let nothing else slip through with it. I cautiously scrutinized the recollection, careful to look further, not to pierce the daze, beyond which phantom shapes lay in wait. The motor of my excitement was revving up; but I still made no attempt to look out of the door.

Another memory was trying to reach me, but seemed unable to pass the curve in the passage, which restricted my view. I seemed to be waiting for someone to come round the bend. So strong was this impression, that I

imagined I could hear footsteps approaching—light, almost dancing steps; the steps of a young girl. All of a sudden I remembered the little hairdresser's encouraging whisper that there was still some hope for me somewhere. At the same time, I recalled how I'd given my loyalty to the cloud, which must protect me in return, and eagerly started forward; then stopped again, afraid to look for the extraordinary sky-sign, in case it had vanished. I knew now I hadn't looked out before because I was afraid my precious unreality might prove unreal.

Sometime, however, I would have to look. So I thought, Now. Frowning with the effort, feeling something huge and heavy and broken roll from one side of it to the other, I slowly forced my head up until I could see the sky.

With a tremendous sense of relief then, I saw the thing I was hoping for. I gazed out at a wide sweep of gravel in blazing sun, and, only a few yards away, the cataract still streaming down, rebounding, fountainlike, where it struck the parched ground, before gradually dissolving in spray in the upper air.

Now I could relax. Fascinated, I wandered out, to look more closely at the ghostly spume. I could feel the sun's heat on my back like a scorching cloth, through which from time to time improbable chills furtively passed; a subsensation of coolness so unnatural that it gradually restored my former insulated condition, and relegated reality to unimportance.

Standing there, I had the feeling of putting on armour, taking up secret weapons, becoming, like a dreamer, invulnerable for the moment—safe in my dream. Now I could face the world, having no part in life; the

presence of waiting phantoms could be forgotten. I was outside everything, surrendered unconditionally to my dream, giving no thought to my next move, prepared to obey whatever impulse next reached me from the unseen. When a car approached, I deliberately stepped out in front of it, forcing it to pull up abruptly, with squealing brakes, in a flurry of noise and gravel. Seeing that the scared driver was the man who had taken me to the town, I climbed in beside him, and ordered him to drive me there now, ignoring his protests and his shadowy presence.

My thoughts went no further than this destination, faintly brightened by some prefiguration of unnamed promise. The chauffeur was still resisting my order, so I repeated it, confident that the dream had to run its course. It seemed only natural and inevitable that the car should now start moving the way I wished to go.

But at this point a grey figure burst out of the house, shouting unintelligibly. The driver called out something in his own language, and then, emboldened, presumably, by the reply, put his hand on the brake. Though I knew the interruption could only be temporary, I resented its disrespect for the dream. Leaning out, I called to Penny to get out of the way, vaguely aware of a wave of entreaty she wafted towards me, of which I took no notice, only wanting to get on with the dream. Growing impatient, I leaned across the driver, pushing him back in his seat, and took hold of the wheel myself, pressing my foot on the accelerator, swerving past the girl, and driving on quickly until she and the house were left well behind. Then, seeing that the peasant was too intimidated to put up any further resistance, I relinquished the steering to

him again, not wanting to be bothered with manipulating the car.

At the boundary of the estate, I turned to look back at Eagles' Nest for the last time. With the greater part of the domain already obliterated by the deluge from above, the lower slopes had most strikingly the air of a mirage, unreal as an optical illusion conjured up by the prismatic effects of sunshine on spray. Only the massive rocklike building seemed made of heavier stuff, indestructible and malign, impervious to the weird torrent foaming around it, as if it possessed a stronger spell of its own.

The car took a corner sharply, throwing me off my balance; when I next looked, Eagles' Nest was no longer visible. The whole fantastic scene had been swept out of sight, like the creation of a child's imagination or nightmare, suddenly wiped off a slate. I leaned back and looked straight ahead, with a sense of relief, as if the place had been wiped out of existence, and, with it, all that had happened while I had been there.

With the past thus conveniently expunged, I was free to orient myself exclusively to the future. Hope brightened like a rising star towards which I was racing; while starlike on my mind's screen rose the face of the hair-dressing girl. Suddenly I knew I was going to her, and this seemed right and comforting, and it made me glad. Now the future appeared hopeful and clear. I had only to meet the girl for my life to fall into a pleasant pattern; troubles and mystery would give way to harmonious, simple joy. I felt this, rather than thought it. Instead of in pictures, the future revealed itself through a revival of those youthful, optimistic feelings I had experienced

while I was walking beside her. Existing only in anticipation, I was indifferent to present discomforts; to the heat and glare, to the jolts travelling up my spine and stabbing into my aching head.

We had already reached the outskirts of the town when something made me look back for the second time. To my astonishment, the sky behind was all overcast, tawny-black masses of cloud everywhere rushing forward at terrific speed; while I watched, they eclipsed the sun, changing the whole aspect of the world, as well as of my mental landscape. I saw the storm clouds as the actual visible influence of Eagles' Nest, by which I was being pursued; and at once my armour of unreality fell from me; the confidence which had never really been mine, since it belonged to the dream, vanished with it, replaced by foreboding.

Eagles' Nest had not been swept off the face of the earth, but was still very much in existence; and so, consequently, was the past I had been trying to lose. Unspecified happenings, lurking, obscure and monstrous, in memory's deepest recess, pressed forward implacably towards recognition. Though I fought against them with all my might, I knew that, ultimately, they must come forth.

The girl I was coming to meet now receded into the background, almost forgotten; of the lately promising future, nothing was left but a sense of increasing urgency, tension; an undefined dread of some obstacle or failure, as if I might be too late. I could only stare out with acute dismay at the streets I'd always seen full of life and in brilliant sunshine, now ominously deserted, the buildings derelict-looking in lurid thunder-light, lava-

coloured and wan. At the sight of the hotel, standing up tall and livid in this hallucinatory light, the pulse of my excitement began to race madly.

The pace of the car was far too slow for my impatience, and, while it was still travelling fast, I jumped out, and started running distractedly towards the building. I scarcely noticed the huge tepid drops that were falling out of the sky, sparsely, heavily, like swollen and torpid insects, thickening into a buzzing swarm just as I got to the entrance. I could hear nothing but my own thundering heart, and then, a formidable sound of finality, shutters banged-to overhead. For a few seconds I stood, fighting for breath, in the doorway. Dim indistinct figures scurried past: or perhaps I only imagined them. As in a fever, everything I saw balanced precariously on the brink of disappearance.

Having got here, I found myself reluctant to enter the place, looking suspiciously at the pale walls, which seemed to be hiding something, as if their pallor were a species of camouflage. What booby-trap could be waiting for me in there? With an effort, I smothered the question, and went inside.

The interior of the hotel was as desolate as the street; its big unlit rooms contained only armies of empty chairs, standing in strangely disordered groups, suggestive of sudden flight. Glancing about, never seeing a soul, I advanced uncertainly through several such rooms, and paused in an inner lounge, feeling I had come to a dim world, all my own. I no longer remembered clearly what I was doing here, nor did this seem important. The episode had assumed the timeless quality of a childhood adventure. The twilight rooms, opening one out of

the other, resembled a sequence of gloomy caves; it would not have surprised me if, disturbed by my footsteps, bats had flown out of the curtains. Under the stalactite mineral gleam of the chandeliers, the disorderly furniture groups might have been intricate groves of stalagmites, among which I was groping.

The rain noise was louder now. Dusk had deepened to the point where furniture and shadows were indistinguishably merged. I had distantly observed, as I moved, these black shadows, that seemed to move with me. Now that I was standing still, they became much more prominent, I was much more conscious of them. I had an impression of shadows furtively gliding and bunching in indistinct masses, taking up their positions all round me. Noticing that I was shivering, I quickly told myself this was only the result of the fall in temperature which had come with the rain, unwilling to admit that the phantoms were closing in. But I felt the unacknowledged fear thrusting towards consciousness; and abruptly swung round, as if I could avoid it by facing another way.

Surprisingly, the trick seemed to work. Under my wary eye, the shadow circle moved back a little. Then suddenly the whole ring was dissolving, they broke and fled, as miraculously, a small star appeared, a sign, BEAUTY SHOP, burning serenely in letters of cool green fire. For the moment at any rate I was saved.

As completely as if I'd entered a different room, closing the door between, my last sequence of thoughts and feelings was left behind and forgotten; a totally different set took its place. There was no more excitement; only tranquillity, and a childlike trust. Now that I'd found the girl, or rather, the place where I believed her to be,

I did not doubt that everything would presently come right, just as I had anticipated. I did not doubt, because I wasn't thinking at all, having once more lapsed into a state of pure expectancy. I wasn't even impatient. I could afford to wait . . . to feel tired . . . all at once I was almost too tired to stand; and, still without thinking, subsided into the nearest chair. So thoroughly had I done with my recent notions, that, had I noticed I was in a dark corner where shadows accumulated, I probably would have seen nothing odd in the way they befriended me now, rolling themselves into a soft grey pillow for my aching head.

I had just settled comfortably in the chair, facing the little sign, at which I was dreamily gazing, when, with an effect of startling abruptness, the door under it opened and the person for whom I was waiting emerged, accompanied by a young well-dressed man I had never seen.

Called back so suddenly from pleasant vacancy, my reactions were slow. I barely had time to recognize the girl before the presence of her companion disconcerted me utterly. For some reason it had never occurred to me that she might not be alone when I arrived; all my thoughts and sensations were thrown into wild disorder by this situation. I was still trying to adjust myself to it when lights burst out startlingly overhead. While I made myself inconspicuous, shrinking back in the chair, a waiter appeared, to whom the strange young man spoke curtly and with some arrogance, evidently administering a reproof. More and more lights kept coming on. Even across the large room, I could now easily see the young stranger's expression; the somewhat imperious frown with which he reprimanded the waiter; and the extra-

ordinary change when he turned to the girl with a smiling intimate tender look. The contrast was so arresting that I was struck by it, even in the midst of my own emotional disturbance, puzzled, until I realized that I shouldn't have seen this last look, which had been private and meant for the girl alone.

A conditioned behaviour-reflex made me glance away. Then, when my eyes returned to her, I somehow didn't seem able to see her distinctly, or else I could not take in what I saw. Her hair seemed to form a shining curtain around her face, excluding my gaze. She moved as if set apart in a happy private security, walking arm-in-arm with her friend, towards a door at the far end of the big room. The two of them moved slowly, it seemed to take them a long time to get there; long enough for my fluctuating emotions to crystallize into resentment. Watching them walking off with my last chance of happiness, so unhurried and unconcerned, as if they'd been alone in a country lane, I forgot about hiding myself and wanted to call them back—to interrupt their heartless and hurtful progress. But though I stood up and opened my mouth, no sound came. I saw that, absorbed in each other, they had not even noticed me. And now the door finally shut them out of my sight; its blank panels set a final full stop—among other things, to my indignation. I stood motionless, dazed by this vast anticlimax.

The booby trap had caught me, with a vengeance. This was as much as I realized, until, coming gradually out of shock as out of an anaesthetic, I saw the waiter approaching, and on a sudden impulse asked: "Who were you speaking to, over by the Beauty Shop?"

"The manager, of course." Sore and surly, the man stared at me offensively, wondering probably, if he ought to eject this distraught and dishevelled questioner; who settled the point by hurrying out of the room.

Somehow, the waiter's reply had made me feel that I should have guessed, when the manager was first mentioned, that this was how the situation would end. Sudden shame struck through my stupefaction, agonising as a severe nerve pain. The grotesque conceit of imagining I could be an object of interest to a pretty girl—I, a penniless middle-aged failure! I must have been quite demented, commandeering a car and chasing after a hairdresser I hardly knew, like any besotted youngster. I made an inarticulate sound of disgust as I strode along, tiredness and everything else forgotten in the instinctive urge to rush away, faster and faster, as though, if I went far and fast enough, I might outdistance my detested self; escape from my ludicrous unseemly lapse.

I was making instinctively for the door by which I'd come into the hotel. But I went wrong somewhere, and entered a small unlit room, a private sitting-room probably, with long bare windows like in-staring inhuman eyes—coldly they bored through my flight compulsion and forced me to see them; forcing upon me at the same time the deteriorated badly-functioning mechanism of my mind and body.

Outside the door-long windows, the street was hidden by a swaying curtain of rain, sprinkled with sequins of reflected light from the nearby entrance. Continuous rain noise, like someone crying, burst into spluttering sobs as I opened a window and stepped out on to the pavement; where, immediately, the storm fell upon me,

beating about my head with its cold wet paws, driving me back into shelter, bewildered by so much violence.

At least it seemed to have battered into me the fact that I could escape nothing by running away, for now I stayed where I was, huddled into the window embrasure as if in hiding, not attempting to dry the cold drops sliding over my face like tears.

I stared at the rain so long that it became a wall between me and everything in the living world. And also it looked to me like the stuff of phantoms, as I watched it bulge and thicken ominously, wherever something shapeless seemed to be taking shape. Suddenly my fears had caught up with me again: but with this difference—that now I had come to the end of running away.

Now I must make the fearful effort of standing still, of confronting my situation directly, with no dream-screen intervening. It was no longer possible not to remember. I was forced to face the memories I had been trying to lose. Not that the phantoms were in the past, I at once discovered; it wasn't there I would find them. My memory seemed to come back with a different perspective, so that I saw the happenings at Eagles' Nest, not as an isolated period of disaster, but a continuation of the sentence passed on me long ago, when the chance drawing of lots had cost me my rightful place in the world.

"But that's unbearable," I thought, unable to tolerate the concept of a senseless universal injustice. There *must* be some significance; life must include a meaning somewhere . . . For a moment I tried to go back to my old fantasies . . . my luck would change . . . things

would come right, even now . . . No; it was no good; I couldn't delude myself any more—didn't even really want to. I'd lived too long with illusions already, like a child with its fairy tales.

Heavy grey rain, steadily falling, kept its wall between me and everything in the world, providing an analogy between my actual state and my state of mind. Eagles' Nest had been my last hope, and Eagles' Nest had expelled me; in this extremity, I'd turned to a personal relationship, and the girl too had cast me off. Now I had reached a point beyond all that was familiar; a point of isolation from which nobody could or would rescue me—where I must rely on myself alone. It was a desperate situation. Yet, I hadn't lost absolutely everything; independence, self-reliance, still remained . . . I might perhaps win through even now.

Returning to stand at the open window, I had the sense of deliberately turning my back on self-deception, and facing the phantoms at the same time. I almost expected some horror-shape to materialize out there in the rain. I almost was disappointed because there was only the watery wall—the implications of which, I began to see, I hadn't yet fully grasped. But, if I still didn't know exactly what the phantoms were, I had at all events found out that they didn't exist in outer reality. There was no escape from them, because they were inside me. Monstrous as the realization was, it held a germ of hope; for what was a part of me I could surely learn, eventually, to control.

I had been trying to keep the Administrator out of my mind. But the habit of thought was too strong; my inner life had for too long centred about the being who

seemed to have turned out to be my betrayer. Never would I be able to forget him. Yet, here too, the angle of memory seemed to have shifted. In my new truthfulness, I found it hard, looking back, to distinguish between my authentic recollections, and what I had imagined. I almost began to wonder whether in longing for a protector, I had not invented one—perhaps the Administrator was my own creation, all the more formidable for this reason; or, at least, endowed with imaginary attributes the man never possessed.

In my preoccupation, I had scarcely noticed the gradually brightening sky. Now I became aware that the town was rapidly coming back to its normal life, though the rain was still streaming down, with no sign of abating. Traffic was again on the move. Pedestrians hurried in all directions, their glistening umbrellas like bubbles floating on the grey waterway the street had become. All these moving bubbles produced a restless, confused effect of promiscuous haste, like the futile scurrying of disturbed insects. My world seemed very quiet and calm by comparison. Everything had contracted into the small self-contained world inside my skull. Nothing mattered except the mastery of my own being. My mistake in the past had been the attempt to share in that aimless gregarious hurrying to and fro. But now I'd come to the end of everything in my old life: and where there was an end, something new must begin.

My actual situation could hardly have been worse: without money; without even my few poor possessions; with no idea where I was going, or how I was going to live. Yet these facts didn't seem to touch me, so absorbed

was I in my new sense of inner direction, as I turned up my collar, preparing to step out into the rain, confident that I was on the right track at last.

Just as I pushed the window open to its widest extent, a car came swishing along towards me, spraying a double wave in its wake from the shallow grey rain-pocked river that was the street; and I drew back, waiting for it to pass, not wanting to start out by getting soaked in muddy water. But, instead of passing, the car stopped, a few yards from me, at the hotel entrance; where a stream of artificial light, still outshining weak daylight filtered through heavy cloud, blotched the drowned pavement with its reflexions, like gaudy flowers flattened underfoot. Scattering these light-flowers in all directions, a girl jumped out and ran up the steps. I watched her well-shaped legs splash through light, light splashing her grey skirt to the waist, while all the upper part of her body remained obscure in the dimness. I couldn't see her face: but a look of astonishment must have appeared on mine, as I heard her call out to some invisible person: "Has a stranger been here since the storm? A man without a hat—" A door slammed, shutting off Penny's familiar voice, as she entered the building.

Although I knew I had no business to be in this room and ought to depart before anyone saw me, I continued to stand motionless, my thoughts thrown into confusion by her unexpected arrival. Why on earth had she turned up again? . . . "Like a bad penny," I thought foolishly; and then realized that I must be the hatless stranger about whom she had asked—she'd come here looking for me—as last I had grasped it. But my confusion only

increased. "So there's still someone who cares what becomes of me," was the first coherent thought to emerge, without my sanction, from my muddled brain, like a silly bird flapping unhelpfully round the problem. For her coming had raised a question which I must decide at once. If I didn't want to become involved with Penny, I must disappear, on the spot, instantly, before she found me.

My first reaction had been a feeling of gratitude for her interest. But now I began to resent the way she'd interrupted my thoughts, just when they seemed on the point of becoming clear. At last, I'd thought, I was on the right track. But I couldn't have been very firmly established on it, if a detail like the girl's arrival was enough to set me back where I always had been, in uncertainty and confusion. Muddle-headed and irritable, I began feeling angry with her, as if to humiliate me, she'd deliberately engineered this proof of my inadequacy. But my anger vanished when, reverting to an earlier notion, I wondered whether the secretary too could be a projection of mine. This idea, which was neither quite serious nor altogether fanciful, had the paradoxical effect of making me see her, not as I usually did, in relation to myself and my affairs, but as an individual in her own right, around whom my bewildered thoughts were revolving.

Of course she must have known I'd been expelled ignominiously from Eagles' Nest, and that, by associating herself with me, she was likely to endanger her own position there. So why had she followed me? I hadn't, surely, given her much cause to expect a welcome . . .

I wasn't aware of ever having paid any special atten-

tion to her appearance: I was surprised by the vividness with which she now appeared before me—friendly, spiteful, frightened, tearful, demure, smiling, mischievous—I saw her face in all these different moods, before it merged with the crowd of possibilities filling my head; all the ingredients of a new life, with all its intricate ramifications—it was there, waiting for me, if I liked to choose it.

I was gazing down absently at the pavement under its film of water. A queer shapeless shadow came slithering stealthily over the submerged paving stones, sliding up to me furtively, reminding me, by its sinister look, of the phantoms I'd half expected to take their monstrous shape in the rain. I knew now that they were only the ghosts of my fears, of bad habits I'd acquired or developed, and that I alone gave them the power to haunt me. By evoking the idea of my responsibility for them, the shadow seemed to be leading my mind to another conclusion, which concerned the possibility of a new life, just opening before me. What sort of new life could there be for me? it seemed to be saying: since I was no less responsible for the shape of external events, which were without form, until I forced them into my mould. I alone had imposed upon life the pattern of injustice and failure which it was too late now to change. I could only go on with the pattern I had created, correcting details perhaps, but not the design itself; working out through it the problem of my existence. I must find out for what crime I had doomed my most innocent acts to frustration—at least I would have, ultimately, the satisfaction of knowing myself.

So there could be no new life for me. And it seemed

as if there could be no personal relationships either; they would only obscure the issue. Yet I couldn't help dwelling nostalgically on the subject a little longer. Not long ago I had wanted human contact more than anything in the world. And now it was offered to me at the very moment I needed it more than ever; when my real difficulties were just beginning. If I rejected what Penny offered, it would not be because I underestimated the value of her gift, but because the compulsive urge to self-mastery took precedence over everything. Yet, in spite of it, I felt a certain bewildered curiosity about the girl's inconsistent behaviour. In the past, she had given me good cause to distrust her. But the knowledge that she was searching for me at this moment, and at considerable risk to herself, now inclined me to think of her kindly.

The sinister shadow had drifted away, only my own distorted countenance gazed at me lugubriously from the wet pavement. I looked up: and a passing gust of wind tugged at my damp hair, and then went undulating along the curtain of rain, which obscured the atmosphere like a fog, and made the street beyond seem dim and far off. I had a momentary illusion of being invisible, as though I were standing behind a wall of unclear glass, which the glances of the passers-by would not be able to penetrate.

The rain continued to fall, steadily, heavily, as if it would never stop. I couldn't brace myself to take the final step, standing there, as nearly outside as I could be without actually advancing into the downpour. More outside than in, I was only aware of the ceaseless rain-noise, and the wind's erratic meanderings; barely con-

scious of the human sounds accumulating in the hotel behind me; until I fancied I heard my name, and turned back quickly towards the door of the room, uncertain, my ears still full of the drumming rain.

I knew I ought to make haste and go—if I was going. But I still didn't stir, although, now that I had my back to the window, I seemed surrounded by steps and voices, above which that other voice I'd already heard came to me unmistakably. I could no longer ignore the fact of Penny's nearness, and kept my eyes warily on the door, half hoping, against all probability, that she wouldn't open it, though I was in fact quite sure she was about to do so.

When I saw the handle start to turn, I made a hasty move towards a last minute escape. Of course I was too late. But the sight of the wall of water outside reassured me, giving me the idea that it made very little difference whether I stayed with her, or set out alone on my journey that had neither visible starting point nor destination. It didn't matter: since, however closely I became involved with another existence, my own world would always remain secret, inaccessible and shut-off; nobody would even see me, except as a dim, changeable, wavering shadow, through its impenetrable, semi-opaque walls.

ELEVEN

THE DREAM WITHIN

A hard compact object, self-contained as a nut, lies on the night's dark floor. Perhaps it is some kind of an outsize nut. Anyhow, I've got to find out the best way of breaking it open; which is difficult, because it keeps growing all the time. It's already as big as a house, though without the least sign of a door or a window; its unbroken walls, battlemented with cloud, tower up into the sky, and, however much I crane my neck, I can't see their tops any longer. Timidly putting out my hand, I touch the smooth cold shining surface, like onyx, like black ice, in which I can't detect the least crack, the least indication of weakness. The austere awe-inspiring perfect finality with which these terrible bare walls deny me all hope of entry makes it seem presumptuous, ludicrous, absolutely grotesque, to imagine I could ever break through them. Yet I must go on trying; there's no other reason for my existence.

I wake up shivering. Before my eyes are really open, I instinctively shut them again; but cold and discomfort won't allow me to sink back into sleep; besides, I've already slept nine or ten hours—nearly twice as long as I was in the habit of sleeping in the old days. Since my misfortune, I seem to be trying to sleep away as much as possible of my life, and of this arctic winter.

What is there to get up for? I could sleep the clock round for all the difference my being up and about is going to make, to me or to anyone else. There's nothing I have to do, nobody I have to see, in the hours ahead; and this is true, not only of today, but of every day till the day of my death—or so it seems, at this moment of cold depression.

Just as my body accommodates itself automatically to the lumps and hollows of the ancient mattress, my thoughts set off of their own accord, travelling back along well-worn channels to the period before catastrophe overwhelmed me. How long ago that time seems, and how unbelievably different everything was then! It is like thinking of some idyllic honeymoon in the dim past. Then I had friends, a secure (as I thought) position; I liked my work and did it well, it was well paid, brought me in touch with interesting people, and would eventually lead to a pension. I was industrious and ambitious; nothing, it seemed, could deprive me of a successful career.

When the messenger came to summon me to the fatal interview I was in my own office. And I remember thinking it slightly odd that he should have come there to look for me, as, at that hour, I would have normally been in another part of the building. This particular morning, however, having brought in a small Persian rug of mine (so unquestionably did the room seem to belong to me) which I thought would add a touch of distinction to the dull office atmosphere, I had spent some time trying it in different places, to see where it looked best.

Perhaps I was over-confident in those days. But it

would have been sheer dishonesty to pretend not to know that I was spoken of generally as one of the coming men. On my way to the chief's room, all I felt was a faint annoyance at the interruption of my usual routine: having already wasted time over the rug, I hoped he wouldn't detain me long; as he was known to be a man of very few words, this seemed unlikely.

In view of his reputation, I was amazed when the elderly dignified white-haired man embarked on a long rigmarole I simply could not follow, keeping his head lowered instead of looking me in the face, and fidgetting constantly with the things on his desk. Such symptoms of nervousness being highly infectious, I began to feel faintly nervous myself. Evidently, the matter was more serious than I'd supposed. But what *was* the matter? Though I listened carefully to what he said about global unrest, world bankruptcy, and the re-assessment of economy measures, including a reduction in personnel in our own department, I still failed to see how I came into all this. But, that I was closely concerned in some way, was obvious, since he mixed up his remarks with otherwise quite irrelevant personalities; praise for my work, and expressions of deep regret, which I found incomprehensible.

He'd kept his face hidden from me the whole time, but, just as I was about to ask him to speak more plainly, he looked up, revealing a shocking change, deterioration, as if, since I saw him last, he'd been touched by a premature senility. It was all the more of a shock to me because, only a few days earlier, I'd been impressed by his air of youthful robustness, making the white hair seem like a wig. Now, in my concern, and

the effort of hiding it, I lost, momentarily, the thread of what he was saying. What in the world could have caused so abrupt and alarming an alteration? That I could be connected with it seemed incredible, even after I'd heard the words that now have engraved themselves on my mind.

"And to think that the lot has to fall upon you . . . our very best man . . . the one we can least spare . . . if only I could order a re-casting! But I daren't do it . . . I've read the direction again and again, and it's most explicit . . . in every case, no matter who he is, the first man on whom the lot falls is to go . . ."

I didn't really take it in, even then. Although my brain understood some disaster had occurred, the actuality of it didn't strike home, but eluded me, partly in disbelief—How could so monstrous an injustice be allowed to happen?—and partly in the painful spectacle of the chief's collapse. The woebegone old face on the other side of the desk seemed to come between me and my own feelings. Those once-penetrating eyes, now bleary and almost tearful, gazing wistfully into mine, seemed to be begging me wordlessly not to lose my temper . . . not to get excited . . . not to shout . . . "For heavens' sake, don't make a scene," they seemed to implore me: "it's not my fault . . ." And: "It's no good asking me to help you . . . I can't do anything."

To tell the truth, I felt a trace of contempt, as well as compassion, for the man, whose virtues I had up to now made my example; whose strength and integrity I had always revered. The two of us suddenly seemed to have changed places, so that I felt I had to protect the defenceless old weakling, who obviously couldn't stand

the strain of the interview any longer—it was to end a state of affairs which had become intolerably harrowing for us both that I accepted my discharge without argument.

But then I thought suddenly, "What am I doing?" Realizing how I'd been dominated by the situation—let it slip out of my grasp—I longed passionately to seize it again, as if I could grasp my fate in my two hands, and force it into a more propitious shape.

In this turmoil of violent emotion, I turned back to the man at the desk . . . Unformulated suspicion stirring in me, I noticed he hadn't been too overcome to ring the bell while I was not looking . . . for now his secretary came in; a husky young fellow, who gave me a very unfriendly look, though I scarcely knew him, having merely heard him mentioned as a useful member of the staff football team. His superior, in an unsteady voice, asked him to send for his car, as he was too unwell to continue working and would have to go home; immediately afterwards letting his head sink forward into his hands, so that it was impossible for me to catch his eye, as I was trying to do, to plead for some further discussion of my case.

The secretary signed to me peremptorily, indicating the door, which he held open, not out of politeness, but to hurry me through it. Suddenly I became really agitated, seeing that I'd waited almost too long in silence, and was now in danger of being forced to leave without having said a word in my own defence; and, taking no notice of the aggressive young man, muttered urgently to my chief:

"Can't I speak to you privately? Some other time, if

you're not up to it now . . . There are several points I should have mentioned just now in connexion with what you told me . . . I didn't think of them at the moment . . . I was too upset . . ."

I paused here, since it had become impossible not to be distracted by his assistant's behaviour; approaching till he was practically touching me, he now stood, scowling, and making menacing gestures, just behind me. Unwilling to say any more in his presence, I hurriedly concluded by bending down and almost whispering into the old man's ear, from which projected a few whitish bristles, not knowing whether he was listening to me or not, for he neither looked up nor uttered a sound. "Surely you realize what a fearful shock this has been . . ." I tried to make my low voice appealing, but the situation was impossible, I could only end, "You can't expect me to have every argument ready on the tip of my tongue . . ."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the secretary clenching his fists, as though he meant to throw me out bodily, and exclaimed indignantly, "Do you authorize this sort of behaviour?" staring at the older man. But he did not answer my question, still remaining silent, motionless, utterly unresponsive; it was as though I hadn't spoken—as though I didn't exist. I can't explain why his attitude had such a devastating effect upon me; but there seemed no way of tackling it; I felt it almost obliterated me. Defeated and rendered helpless, I surrendered unconditionally to this technique of obliviousness; and, rather than come to blows, permitted the secretary to hustle me roughly into the corridor.

I didn't go back to my own office, however, but, as

soon as he'd gone to find the chauffeur, returned to the door of the room we'd just left. But, instead of going in boldly, I stood outside, overcome again by that sense of impotence the chief had induced by treating me as if I'd ceased to exist . . . as if I'd become a nothing . . . non-existent, and therefore incapable of protesting against my outrageous dismissal. This was what really kept me from opening the door; though, at the time, I preferred to think I was deterred by consideration for him, envisaging the look of dismay I would see on the poor old face as soon as I entered. And when, presently, the bent white-haired figure emerged, leaning heavily on two supporters, and with slow dragging steps moving past me, where I stood unseen in the shadows, I was glad I had not gone back to torment this pitiable creature.

The strange thing was, that though I never spoke with him again, or was even in the same room, I did catch sight of him quite soon after this, leaving the building with the same jaunty stride that had impressed me before with his youthfulness, and looking the very opposite of a sick man. Was it all a pretence—an act he put on? But why should he practise such a deception, which could only have been meant to prevent me defending myself, when previously he had always seemed to think well of me?

Whatever his motives may have been, I'm only too sure now, huddled in the thin blankets, that the silence he induced must have told against me, suggesting, perhaps, that I could find no argument against the appalling injustice, or even construed as an admission that my fate was not undeserved. I can see how people must

have been mystified by my passive acceptance of the blow, which, at one stroke, deprived me of the benefits of past work and a whole promising future, as well as nullifying long years of training. But no one who hasn't experienced it can possibly know the effect of being made nothing, totally overlooked, by the being one has always admired and endeavoured to emulate. To be ignored in this special way constitutes a tremendous and deadly insult the inner self can scarcely hope to survive. I was stupefied by it; and stunned by the enormity of the disaster I couldn't begin even to comprehend. And, I remember, too, how my incredulity lasted throughout the short period while it would have been possible to appeal. Because I was innocent of any wrong-doing, and had always been industrious and conscientious, I couldn't believe I should really be victimized in this way; thrown on the world, forced to start life again from the very beginning, and without the stamina, flexibility and other advantages I'd possessed in my first youth.

Instead of facing up to reality, I went on thinking, in a muddled, half-conscious fashion, that something must happen to save me; the whole thing would turn out to be a mistake; or perhaps one of those obscure tests devised by the psychological department to probe my reactions. Not only until the last moment, but far beyond it, I lived in expectation of some unspecified miracle, as if providence must intervene on my behalf. Only lately has the full realization of my position come home to me in all its horror and hopelessness.

For a time, I was shielded from it by a certain Administrator, living in the same town, and known to me in

my official capacity, who took me under his protection in the kindest way, employing me to make a catalogue of the books in his large library. As long as I was under the patronage of this wealthy, influential man, sharing his luxurious home and treated by him more as a friend and equal than an employé, I couldn't possibly get a true picture of what had happened to me. All that summer passed without my being really aware of the transition from my former safe substantial circumstances to poverty and a precarious dependence. Absorbed in new interests and surroundings, I hardly gave a thought to my lost career for days at a time.

I wished occasionally that the place I was supposed to occupy in the Administrator's household could be stated precisely. But, to raise the point, seemed to imply lack of trust; I persuaded myself that my desire to have my status clearly defined was a mere relic of bureaucratic thinking, for I had complete confidence in my friendly patron. It was a terrible shock when he remarked one day, towards the end of September, that he hoped I'd been looking round for another job, as he would soon be closing the house and going to his estate in the south.

Even now, I can't bear to recall that appalling moment; twisting my head on the pillow, trying to escape the memory, my eyes come in line with the window, outside which appears a savage frieze of chimney-pots iced with rime, against a leaden sky, from which a few white particles float down slowly to the white-edged roofs. No wonder this rich Administrator was one of the first to leave the town, where the winters are so exceptionally severe that everyone who can possibly afford to do so goes south for several months

every year. Of course, I see now how he must have taken his annual migration so much for granted that it never occurred to him to mention it to me before. But then, I was horrified and astonished; I jumped to the conclusion that he wanted to get rid of me. He must have heard some malicious gossip, I thought; something that made him suspect I was less blameless than I made out in the matter of my discharge.

In all fairness, I must admit that, as soon as he saw how he'd upset me, he tried to put things right: I was to come back and finish the catalogue in the spring, if I wasn't settled by then in a permanent post; and, in the meantime, if there was anything he could do, I was to be sure and let him know.

This friendliness, and the promise of his continued interest, reassured me to a certain extent. But the shock had shaken me out of my former unquestioning trust, and belatedly shown me how far my circumstances had deteriorated. Abysses of insecurity had suddenly opened all round me, far too deep and wide to be bridged by a few kind sentences and a vague offer of help. Now there seemed a lack of communication between us. How could I—whose existence had become based on precariousness—ever have thought any real contact possible with a man who had never known a single insecure moment in his whole life?

I didn't exactly suspect that his offer was insincere. But I felt a growing reluctance, as time went on, to put it to the test. Particularly as he had forgotten to leave his address; though this was certainly a mere oversight, of no practical importance, since I could get it from any of his numerous acquaintances in the town. But, instead

of putting my pride in my pocket, and asking for help as soon as difficulties began piling up, I hung on and on, vainly trying all sorts of desperate expedients, until the day when, finally at the end of all resources, I discovered that not a solitary person who knew where he was still remained in the town.

Well, I've only myself to blame. And, as it's quite obvious nobody here is going to give me a chance, I'll just have to draw out of the bank the small sum deposited there for the last emergency, buy a ticket to some other town, and start all over again, trying my luck there. But, good heavens, what a frightful prospect! I'm too old for that sort of thing; I simply have not the energy any longer to fight for a place in the world . . .

Suddenly half ashamed of these thoughts, and of the way I'm still lying in bed when the morning is almost gone, I at last jump up, throw off the blankets, and hurriedly start getting dressed. The rent of the room is paid in advance, I can leave when it suits me to go, which is one good thing.

Shutting my door as quietly as I can, I proceed down the stairs almost on tiptoe in the hope of avoiding the landlady, who is my pet aversion, and always hanging about the landings and passages, spying on all that goes on in the house. In my mind, she's become identified with some malign obstructive force, against which I'm perpetually fighting a losing battle. I know she's longing for me to leave, so that she can let my room to a more prosperous, and therefore more profitable, tenant. How delighted she'll be to hear that I'm going! Though I hate to give her that satisfaction, I'll have to let her know soon—in fact, I ought to tell her this very day.

But not till I've been out for a cup of coffee; stone cold, on an empty stomach, it can't be done.

I arrive at the foot of the stairs without meeting anyone; but then, just as I'm starting to breathe more easily, believing I'm safe, the wretched woman appears right in front of me, and stands motionless, her feet wide apart, her hands planted on her hips, watching me narrowly in silent antagonism, not even answering my good morning, keeping her lips tightly closed in a thin downward line. Radiating disapproval, and encased in numerous dingy garments of nondescript tint, her squat form looks almost square; and it takes up so much room that I have to push my way past her to the front door, a wave of nausea rising in me, as I breathe the stale smell emanating from her untidy birds' nest of greasy hair—does she ever wash it, I wonder?

Afraid she may catch hold of my coat and jerk me back, I tug the door open, and thankfully plunge out into the street. There I meet another relentless opponent, though a bodiless one, in the bitter weather, subjecting me to a continuous silent and ruthless war, that stealthily undermines both my health and my morale, and adds to my difficulties. The freezing air burns its way through my sinuses into my lungs, filling my eyes with water, so that I can hardly see the way to the cheap café on the corner, into which I dive blindly, and subside, breathless, in the nearest chair. Sitting in the steamy atmosphere, I sink into a sort of torpor, occasionally lifting a thick white chipped cup, with no idea what I'm supposed to be drinking.

Presently I rouse myself from this apathy sufficiently to clear the window of foggy moisture, and peer out at

the uninspiring street scene, where a few muffled pedestrians hurry past like bales of animated clothing. All of a sudden then, I see something that makes me scrub feverishly at the cloudy pane—the Administrator has just passed by. To the amazement of the girl at the counter, who stares at me open-mouthed, I jump up, sending my chair clattering back. What a stroke of luck that he should appear just now! At the sight of him I feel a different person; winter's paralysis, and the frustrating force symbolized by the landlady, have lost their ogreish power over me since my benefactor is here. Throwing down a coin on the table, I rush out in pursuit of the tall figure, which I've recognized beyond any possibility of mistake, despite the disguising magnificence of the heavy fur-lined overcoat. I might be wearing such a coat myself, for all I feel of the cold now; new vistas of hope are opening before me, a warm private springtime. The man I'm following isn't too far ahead for me to distinguish the curls of his astrakan collar. I'm just about to overtake him, my mouth already shaping a greeting, when he signs to the driver of a big car, which pulls up beside him, steps in, and is rapidly driven away.

It all happens so quickly that it reminds me of a conjuring trick. I have neither the time nor the presence of mind to call out even. One moment he's within touching distance; the next, as inaccessible as the man in the moon. Utterly confounded, I stare blankly after the diminishing car, until it vanishes round the corner, suddenly, like a snake.

The cold makes me start walking, without realizing what I'm doing. In a stupefaction of disappointment, I

keep on, not noticing where I'm going, until, in my frozen stupor, I bump into someone, and the impact, and the stranger's angry exclamation, bring me back to myself. Looking round, I'm astounded to see that I've come to the street where the Administrator lives. My feet, cleverer than my head, have conducted me to the very door of the house in which I used to work; which strikes me as such a good omen that, my spirits rising again, I feel suddenly hopeful and almost gay. I can see that it was really a lucky thing I failed to accost my patron just now: nobody wants to stand about out of doors in such weather; far better that we should talk comfortably inside.

Surveying the impressive façade with its rows of shining windows, I remember the happier days when, as the accepted friend of the owner, I was quite at home in the luxurious rooms beyond. Shall I be equally welcome, I wonder, now? Of course I will—why not? Most likely I'll be invited to lunch; this makes me realize how hungry I am—that I've eaten nothing so far. What a pleasure it will be to eat delicious food, perfectly cooked and served, in a warm comfortable room! Eagerly, I step forward and ring the bell.

But it seems I don't really feel very confident. As I wait there at the door, I can't help noticing how fast my heart beats, more with anxiety, I feel, than agreeable anticipation. Though I tell myself that, at the very least, I'm bound to be offered a drink, this doesn't reassure me. Why don't they answer the bell? Nervousness making me impatient, I ring again: and hardly have I withdrawn my finger, than a young man in chauffeur's uniform opens the door, and, in a surprised,

disapproving tone, says that his master is only here for the day, on a private visit, receiving no one; and unceremoniously proceeds to shut me out.

But now I'm on the alert, and determined not to be put off; I jump forward and grasp his arm, breathlessly explaining the urgency of my business, while I press into his hand some small coins (actually closing his fingers round them so that he can't refuse), and so force my way in.

The young fellow goes off reluctantly with my request for an interview, leaving me to wait in an anteroom as cold as a church. My steps ring out on the marble floor, as I pace to and fro to keep up my circulation—as well as my courage—between the white-shrouded furniture-ghosts, under the explosions of frozen diamond-glass that hang down from the ceiling. The messenger seems to be away a very long time; what can he be doing? Finding myself at the door, I stand motionless, listening. And the sudden cessation of my loud steps brings down the silence, which, a black panther lying along a branch, has been waiting for this moment to pounce; softly, ponderously, alighting on velvet paws, settling heavily in each crevice and corner; subsiding into each fold of white drapery; filling all the interstices of the icy sparkling cascades overhead—the whole great house is crammed full of its black boneless bulk, and of nothing else whatsoever.

I press my ear to the keyhole without hearing a sound. Suddenly, I'm convinced that I'm alone in the place. The chauffeur must have betrayed me, played me a dirty trick, driving his master away while I've been left waiting here. In a fury, I throw the door open

wide . . . barely missing the young man I'm unjustly accusing . . . who jumps back with an indignant astonished look, and then says very curtly that he's come to fetch me to the library.

Abashed, and feeling an utter fool, I follow him meekly. Why am I so clumsy today, almost knocking people over? Anyone else would put things right in a moment by making some joking remark to the chauffeur; but I can't think of a single thing I could possibly say. Is it because I'm so much alone that my brain seems to be becoming stiff and rusty? Soon I'll be forgetting how to speak altogether at this rate . . . Silent, and still quite deflated, I enter the room, where the Administrator is sitting at a big table covered with papers, holding a document as large as a map in his hand.

The sight of my protector and only friend is enough to dispel my awkwardness and depression immediately; eager and smiling, I hurry forward to greet him. His response, however, is unexpectedly formal. I get the impression that he's surprised by my display of enthusiasm. Bowing slightly to me, he doesn't seem to see my extended hand, but retires again behind the paper he is still holding, and at once become reabsorbed in his reading.

For me, needless to say, this is a terrible blow; in fact, such is my mortification that I feel inclined to leave on the spot. Only the thought of my desperate situation forces me to act more prudently . . . telling myself it would be mad to throw away such a chance . . . I certainly won't get another like it . . .

By way of distraction, I fix my eyes on the Administrator's hand, as it catches the wintry light and produces

a kind of shuttling effect, moving among the papers, and to and from a tray set down amidst them, on which are sandwiches, glasses, and a decanter of pale golden wine. Perhaps because I feel so wretched and uncomfortable, the hand seems to be weaving a transparent screen between me and everything else. The heat of the room may have something to do with it, too; I've got so accustomed to the cold that, in this pleasant warmth, I feel a little bit drowsy, a little derealized. Nothing in front of me looks quite solid; nothing that happens here seems quite like real life.

Dissociated from all that goes on between these four walls, I hear, as from far away, a voice asking, "What is it you want to see me about, Mr.—?" and wonder, although it's no business of mine, why this Mr.— doesn't answer, and where he can be—I don't see any third person . . . "It's you he's talking to, you fool!" a sharp inner voice tries to warn me. But no sooner have I taken it in, than the reality of the situation eludes me again; it's no more than a distant gesticulating and mouthing of shadow players.

"I can't afford to waste any more time . . ."

It isn't the coldly impatient voice that now penetrates to me, but the hand's new movement—suddenly it is moving towards the bell; I suddenly know that it means to ring for the chauffeur to come and eject me. The screen shatters . . . The shadows leap up into towering giants . . . flicker confusingly . . . and become real and concrete. The room is solid again. Horrified, I see that I'm throwing away my last chance.

"Forgive me . . . I'm dreadfully sorry . . . I can't think . . . I must have been dreaming . . ." I hear

myself stammer, with no very clear idea what I'm trying to say. "I've been wanting to see you . . . to get in touch . . . but I didn't know your address . . . seeing you in the street . . ."

"Yes, yes. But, for heavens' sake, come to the point."

For some reason, this interruption affects me as if someone had opened a window in a hot room where I'd been dozing. All of a sudden, I'm wide awake and can speak without hesitation.

"I've had no luck at all since you left. I've tried everything, but I'm still out of a job. Now I've come to the end—I can't hold out any longer. I'm desperate; otherwise I wouldn't have come to you."

"But why *have* you come to me? How am I supposed to be concerned in all this,"

"How . . . ? But you told me to . . . you offered to help me . . ." I can only stare at him blankly, with growing reproach—surely he can't have forgotten . . . ? "You said I could finish the catalogue in the spring; I'm only asking you to let me start work now, instead of waiting till then . . ." It strikes me as such a modest, reasonable request . . . So why should I get more and more agitated as I go on? "The caretaker can let me in. I shan't give anyone any trouble. I don't need a fire or anything of that kind—I'm quite used to the cold—I can work in my overcoat . . ."

"Catalogue . . . ? Fire . . . ? Overcoat . . . ? What is all this? You haven't escaped from a lunatic asylum, by any chance?" For a moment I seem to have cracked the shell of the Administrator's imperturbableness; but, as I lean on the table, desperately searching his face for some sign of sympathy or understanding, and finding none, the

crack is mended again. As expressionless and inscrutable as ever, he pours himself a small glass of the straw-coloured wine, of which he takes a sip, before saying dryly: "You'd better tell me who you are, and who you think I am."

Feeling absolutely disraught now, I speak our names, too disturbed even to wonder why I should do so. "You must remember how I came here every day last summer, making a list of the books . . ." A wistful nostalgia fills me at the thought of that vanished time, I gaze across regretfully at the shelves, until I'm recalled by the words:

"It's quite true, a man of that name *did* work here last year . . ."

So, after all, everything's coming right! My heart gives a great bound; I can scarcely contain myself, turning to him with a delighted smile beginning upon my face . . . which is instantly wiped away, when I hear:

"The trouble is, you aren't the man."

"Not the man . . . ?" Can that possibly be what I really heard? Staggered, absolutely dumbfounded, I slowly straighten up and draw back from the table, staring incredulously at the impassive countenance on the other side. No words come to me. The absurd thing is that I can only remember feeling exactly like this when I was five years old, and a balloon I'd been blowing up laboriously popped in my face. Meanwhile, the cool conversational voice continues. "Is he a friend of yours? Or how do you happen to know his name?"

Surely I'm not expected to answer, when daylight has splintered into rainbow prisms . . . the world is only a straw-coloured swinging ball . . . a bubble . . . im-

prisoned in flashing facets of crystal . . . But, yes, it appears that an answer is required of me: so, with an enormous effort, I manage to anchor myself to the spoken word.

"You must be joking . . . of course you recognize me . . ."

Feebly, I feel my mouth twitch into a ghostly smile. But the face across the table remains unsmiling, unshakeably calm, neither hostile nor friendly; regarding me with disinterested neutral attention—somehow, it has placed on me the onus of proving my identity.

How on earth can I prove who I am? There's my passport, of course; but I don't carry it about with me. My hands start moving from pocket to pocket, in search of a card, an envelope—anything with my name on it, though I'm well aware they won't find it. Suddenly giving up the pretence, I exclaim, "But this is fantastic! You *must* remember me . . . I can't have changed . . . I may be a bit thinner, and my clothes have got shabby, I know. But that's all—there can't be much difference."

If only he'd take his eyes off me . . . it's demoralizing, the way he keeps watching me the whole time with that unchanging face . . . watching each futile move, like a cat watching a mouse . . .

"Look here! I'm wearing the same suit you've seen me in hundreds of times—" I can feel myself rapidly going to pieces, and, in despair, I throw open my overcoat, displaying the worn garments beneath. This performance, too, is watched with the same dispassionate cool attention—suddenly it makes me ashamed of myself. At the same time, feeling panic approaching, I stare wildly about the room, in search of help.

The Administrator sips from his glass, and my hopes sink with the wine; there will be no more hope for me when the glass is empty. This conviction fills me with an intolerable sense of urgency; a terrible pressure invades my being. And now the room all at once takes pity on me; in response to my frantic glances, inspiration comes to me from the shelves of books I once handled with such affectionate care.

"The books!" I almost shout the words, challenging the unruffled calm on the watching face. "You'll have to believe me if I tell you how they're arranged . . . If I hadn't worked here, I couldn't possibly know the titles . . . the authors . . . their order on the shelves . . ." Closing my eyes to exclude that unbreakable mask of terrifying equanimity, I reel off: "The A's begin at the door; classics at the top; philosophy, science and technical subjects below. Biography on the right. Verse and drama on the other side. On the top shelf there's the Antigone . . ." To my amazement, all this has suddenly come back to me out of the blue, as if by a miracle; and now, with the capriciousness of the miraculous, the mysterious source dries up.

"Congratulations. Quite a remarkable achievement." In place of my own hurried voice of inspired excitement, I hear the Administrator's level tones, and see that he's actually smiling a little at me, though this doesn't seem to change the composed abstract neutrality of his expression.

"I'm surprised you can even read the titles at that distance; let alone grasp the arrangement."

Now I hardly listen, knowing I won't hear anything to help me. My final appeal has failed.

"Would you care for a glass of wine after your effort? No . . . ? Then I shall drink your health."

Though I can't bear to look straight at what happens now, out of the corner of my eye, I see the glass lifted towards me by the large white marble-like hand, the owner of which says, "Here's to better days," before raising it to his lips . . . and then putting it down again, empty.

A shudder goes through me . . . it's all over . . . now I must go, and the sooner the better, back to where I belong . . . I've no right to be here. I have no place in this room . . . in this house . . . in this world, for that matter . . . Nothing binds me to my surroundings . . . but the sensitive tendrils of perception, which I have to detach painfully from the graciousness of the warm room . . . to which they obstinately persist in clinging . . . shrinking from the cold sordid ugliness outside.

I step into the street; and the cold welcomes me back to my proper place, pressing me to its icy breast till the teeth rattle inside my head, my whole face starts to ache, toes and fingers turn numb. All this is so familiar that I'm scarcely aware of the discomfort, automatically pushing my freezing hands deep into my pockets.

The realization that these pockets no longer contain the price of even the cheapest meal leads to the thought, "It was a mistake, tipping that chauffeur"; as, yawning with a mixture of hunger, boredom and cold, I start plodding through the dreary icebound streets, back to the house where the landlady will be waiting.